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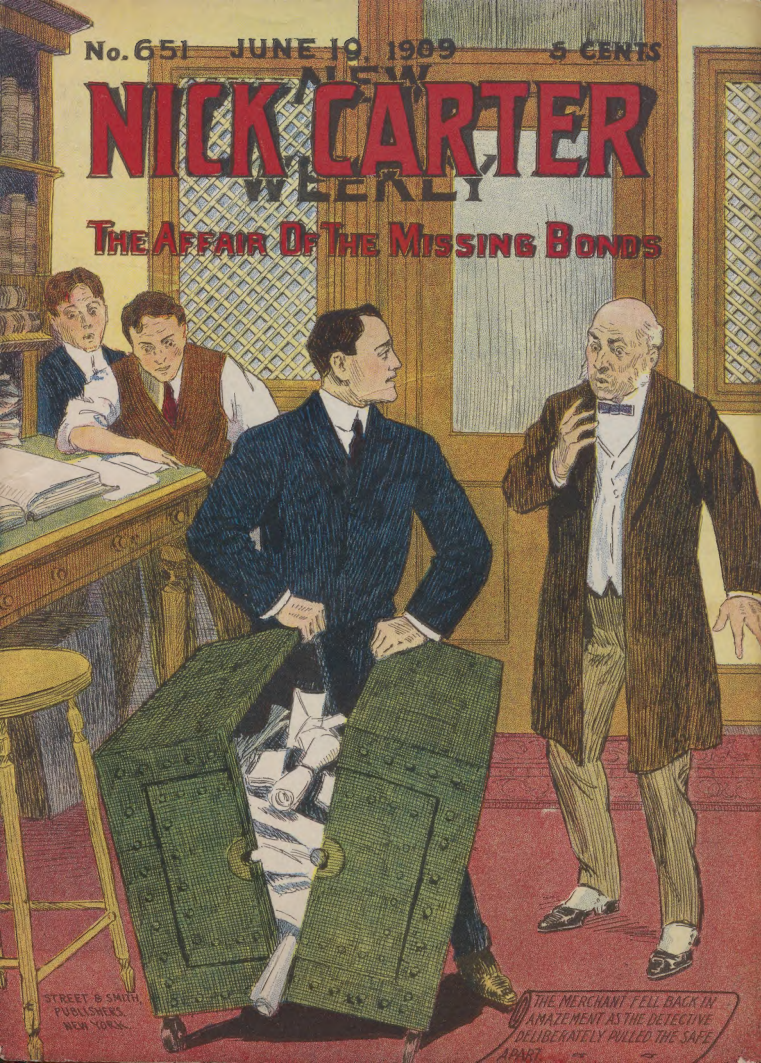
NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

THE AFFAIR OF THE MISSING BONDS



THE MERCHANT FELL BACK IN AMAZEMENT AS THE DETECTIVE DELIBERATELY PULLED THE SAFE APART.

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NEW
NICK CARTER
WEEKLY

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THE AFFAIR OF THE MISSING BONDS;

OR,

NICK CARTER IN THE HARNESS.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A HALF-FACE CLUE.

A big, energetic, red Packard touring car, immaculate and noiseless, darted into the sunny street, took another sharp turn to Madison Avenue and drew up in front of one of the houses. The chauffeur, as clean and dapper as the car, looked inquiringly up to the windows, and at exactly the same instant a pair of cherry-colored doors opened and a gentleman, rather below the medium in height, but of athletic build, stepped out.

"We have a fine morning for the trip, Danny?" the owner of the car saluted, glancing up to a cloudless summer sky.

"I never saw better, Mr. Carter," the man in front responded pleasantly.

"We should make Ardsley in a jiffy, Dan; I'm hungry for the good air and the quiet."

"Hour and a half, sir."

"Now, Danny, none of that hop-skip-and-jump driving. I'm out for relaxation. A little game of golf, a good lunch and we will run on to Briar Cliff Manor."

Nick Carter, detective, was actually bent on pleasure. The Fenwood murder case, coupled with that little deal at Ridgewood, concerning the abducted heiress, had tried even his iron nerves and constitution. He was due a rest and he intended to take it; in harness for months, nature asserted herself.

As the detective had remarked to Chick the morning before:

"Chick, it seems rather strange that I should ask for, or want, relaxation; but the bright, sunny summer mornings have given me a hunger for it. I'm off for a week, at least. Stay here in charge. Patsy is with you. I do not premeditate or anticipate trouble. Unless it is absolutely necessary, do not wire me. I will advise you from day to day, where I am. Let me rest."

And Chick grasping the muscular hand in a tense, earnest grip, responded:

"Chief, you deserve a rest. I have felt the strain myself of late. Nothing could be better than this little jaunt. Play your golf, and—God bless you!"

But events worked by contraries, as we shall soon see. The best of plans may be altered by sudden circumstances. The big touring car was well up Riverside Drive—in the nineties—and was slipping northward with remarkable ease, when that which was destined to be, took place. A coincidence, yes, but a coincidence that threatened, sooner or later, to involve Nick Carter in one of the most astonishing series of adventures it had ever been his fortune to encounter.

The car had just swung under a group of great trees, when, from one of the fine old mansions, as an iron gate jangled open, a man dashed out. Danny had a sudden scare. It looked for a moment as if he could not avoid running over the careless person. Danny's experienced eyes and grip worked in unison.

He stopped the car so quickly that Nick Carter was swung with a jolt against the back of the front seat, the motor buzzing and singing and complaining. Danny had saved a life by sheer daring and nerve. Stumbling, to fall prostrate in the dust of the road, was an elderly man. He was obviously a servant, being in uniform, and was past middle age, gray at the temples, thin, and physically lacking.

"Murder! murder! murder!"

Picking himself from the road, he screeched the words.

The entire transaction had been a matter of almost instantaneous movement. Nick Carter leaped from the car, fearful of an accident, only to see the servant in his dust-covered suit, limping painfully to the curb. He had not been struck by the car.

"What is the matter with you?" the detective inquired, grasping the old man by the shoulder. There was a tinge of impatience in Nick's voice, for it had been a foolhardy move, this dash in front of the machine.

Gasping and puffing and out of breath, the aged servant just managed to blubber out a response.

"Murder! sir—in there!"

"Do you mean that house?"

"Yes—yes, sir."

"When did this occur?"

"Oh, sir, just a wee bit ago."

"What made you blunder out here in such a silly fashion? We might have run you down."

"I scarcely knew what I was doing, sir. That was why. The whole house is upset. We are all nearly crazy."

"Who lives in that house?"

"Mr. Randolph Hicker Minton."

"Who was murdered?"

"A servant, sir."

"A servant!"

"Yes, sir."

"Is Mr. Minton in?"

"Yes, sir."

The detective turned to Danny.

"I'll take a run in and see what's the matter, Danny," he declared; "wait for me, I will not be gone long. I guess there must be some mistake."

The detective was more than amazed when the true state of affairs was made known, however. The house was a comfortable and commodious one, crouching, as it were, back some hundred or more feet from the drive. From the front, the sombre, dark red masonry was not altogether cheerful, but on either side, strips of grass, well-reared flowers, potted ferns and a luxury of landscape gardening tended to relieve what would otherwise have been a gloomy structure. As Nick ran up the steps, he saw, through polished marble pillars, the glint and color of a garden beyond. It was evidently to the rear of the mansion, a hedged-in plot, well supplied with swings, easy-chairs, tea tables and the like.

Carter's summons was answered by a very tearful young woman. She was dressed in a natty walking costume and wore a becoming straw bonnet. With a glance of surprise, she saw the waiting machine, the perturbed servant, puffing and dusty on the road, and Nick.

"What is it you want?" she inquired.

"We were passing in the machine when a servant ran from the garden here. We all but ran him down. He made the amazing statement that some one has been murdered in this house."

"Oh, do not speak of it—please, please do not!" the pretty young woman replied, throwing her hands to her face, and a look of sudden horror appearing in her soft eyes.

"I may be of assistance to you," the detective continued. "Have you notified the police?"

"We have had no time; we discovered it but a moment or so ago."

"Is Mr. Minton here?"

"My father is still in the garden."

"I would like to speak with him."

"I—I—may I have your card?"

"Certainly."

Nick Carter handed out the little bit of cardboard and Miss Minton half ran down the long, broad hall. Every move and word had suggested excitement of a most unusual nature. The detective was growing momentarily more interested in this perplexing affair. Had he been projected unexpectedly into a madhouse, the net result might not have seemed more remarkable. Miss Minton did not return. A servant, his eyes dilated with fear, wabbled to the door and shortly afterward, Nick having been led through the house to the rear garden, Mr. Randolph Hicker Minton became a factor in the adventure.

He was seated along the side of a high shrub hedge, his wicker chair shaded by the spreading leaves of a well-trimmed and nourished tropical tree. Carter was impressed by the steel-cold eyes, the absolutely snow-white hair, the stern, decidedly handsome face and the polished dignity of a gentleman of the old school, past sixty.

"Mr. Carter, your arrival is an opportune one." Minton thrust forth a hand, the grasp of which was firm and tremorless. "You are a man I have often wished to meet."

"Thank you, sir. Certain it is that my arrival smacks of a coincidence. I suppose your daughter explained the preliminary steps leading up to my intrusion. Now, sir, what has happened?"

"A tragedy, grim and terrible."

"There has been murder committed?"

"Yes, Mr. Carter."

"Out in this garden?"

"Yes."

"If you will be kind enough to tell me everything, especially the initial facts, I assure you that it may be within my power to lend valuable assistance."

"In any event, Mr. Carter, I should have asked you to handle the case. Are you at liberty just now?"

Carter hesitated.

"To be very frank, sir, it had been my intention to rest for a few days. I have been practically a slave to investigations of crime for three long months, with not very much of a let-up. I am on my way to my country club, and a three-day machine trip happens to be a portion of the schedule. One can't be in harness all the while. However, if you will describe this affair, my duty to society will doubtless necessitate the handling of it. Proceed."

"I would first ask you to step across to this table. The garden here can be examined carefully at the same time."

Minton led the detective to the centre of the flowered plot. A wicker table of goodly size had been placed right out on the grass; a round table, upon which, as Nick Carter glanced downward, were three sheets of letter paper, a pen and an overturned bottle of black writing ink. The table stood near the middle of a green sward, coped with tiles about a foot apart. The grass square might have been forty feet, both ways. To the right of the table, from where the sleuth now stood, a wicker chair had been overturned and lay with legs sprawled out. Still another chair, also overturned, had been dragged or kicked to the red walk beyond the confines of the sward.

Directly back of the house and garden, the very commercial brick side wall of an immense nine-story modern apartment house loomed, minus window or break of any nature. It fronted on a cross street and there was no connection with it and Minton's grounds; in fact, in an attempt to brighten the dismal dead stretch of brick, vines had been trained half up their surface, feebly clinging to the wall.

To right and left, extending doubtless to the front yard, tall, dark, green hedges gave privacy and a richness of color. It was just such a foliaged outdoor den as a man of means might enjoy.

"You see this table, Mr. Carter," Minton continued. "At about eight o'clock this morning I came out here with my little niece, Margey—she is a child of seven. The sun had been up for hours, as you know, and it was cozily comfortable. Margey played in the yard with her dollies. I sat down at this table, removing from my pockets an envelope containing bonds, the value of which, in good round numbers, would approximate one hundred thousand dollars. The whole matter, as I tell it, sounds foolish, but hear me out with no interruption.

"I spread out the bonds, removing the three rubber bands. My eldest daughter, Grace, opened the far door of the house—the one beyond the hedge—and called to me. She was dressed to go out and had her kodak. She wanted me to put in a new roll of film, an operation that I am acquainted with. I took the kodak, seated myself in that chair across the garden, the one I just vacated, and arranged the film.

"Grace, in the meanwhile, had closed the door and gone upstairs for her gloves, which she had forgotten. I placed the kodak on the chair, walked past the table upon which I had left the outspread bonds, and gained the door. I opened it, called to Vox, one of the servants, and swung around almost immediately. I had heard Margey cry—a quick little scream of terror. For a moment it was incomprehensible to me. Then I saw what had happened; in part. I saw the hedge open, as if there had been a trap in it and the flying heels of a man twinkled instantaneously; and were gone. He looked back just once—the lower part of his face, however, was completely shut off by the hedge, so that I could get only a very indistinct view of the eyes and the upper part of his head; he wore no hat and his hair was quite mussed up. Then he was gone. The ink had been overturned, the chairs scattered, and, naturally, the bonds were missing—gone—vanished."

"But the murder, sir; there has been talk of a murder? This is the first I have heard of a bond robbery. Were the two associated?"

"Come, come with me," Minton answered, his hand upon Nick Carter's arm, unsteady for the first, "the shadow of death and disaster has fallen upon my home."

CHAPTER II.

ADDING INSULT TO INJURY.

"I am intensely interested in everything you have said," Nick Carter declared, stopping Minton, who would have led him from the garden, "but I am afraid that my personal curiosity is getting the best of my good judgment. Suppose we leave the murder absolutely aside for the time being; suppose, for the sake of acquiring a connected idea of things, that we rehearse with still more care the affair of the missing bonds. In the first place, many points strike me as most incongruous. Why should you have these bonds at the house? Again, why, of all places, should you select this open garden for matters that might well be handled in the protected environments of a banking establishment?"

"I felt that you might ask that very question, Mr. Carter, yet the answer is simple and entirely logical. Yesterday I changed my old banking connections. Three safe-deposit vaults were cleaned up. I have been negotiating for the sale of the bonds in question and wished to bring them home with me for examination. Fifty thousand dollars, represented by those pieces of paper, were to be made out in the name of my daughter Grace this very day—her twenty-first birthday. She will be married next month, on the second."

"Who knew of the bonds beside yourself, and of this transference?"

"Only my very immediate business associates. I am in the fruit business, and have orange groves and pineapple plantations in Florida. We have done well."

"Were they government bonds?"

"Yes, iron-clad; the best."

"Did your daughter Grace know that she was to receive this very handsome present."

"I had not told her up to the time of the theft."

"At what time did you start for home with the bonds?"

"Yesterday; I think it may have been six o'clock."

"Did any one know that you had them on your person?"

"Not to my knowledge. They were in a tin case, with other valuable documents. The case was wrapped in brown paper."

"Where did you keep this case during the night?"

"In my safe. I have one upstairs."

"Do you not think it was an unwise and rather risky thing to take these bonds into the garden?"

"Why? I have lived in this house for the past sixteen years. There has never been a robbery nor the hint of one. Look how we stand. To our right is the home of Mr. Greenleaf. The entire family is now occupying the house. There is no pathway between us, only the hedge and his high iron fence. On the other side, the Reverend Otter's residence. I understand, however, that the minister is away for two months and that the house is closed."

"Ah, then the place where our clever thief escaped through the hedge was directly opposite the Reverend Otter's residence."

"Yes, but he has a caretaker; two of them, in fact. It would be practically impossible for a sneak thief to enter their grounds without being seen."

"On the contrary, I should say that nothing could be easier."

"The hedge has been even better than a fence. It is head high and close-grained."

"Yet the man easily plunged through it?"

"Another sign of cleverness, Mr. Carter. Let me show you. This was planned beforehand and yet how, how could they? I did not know myself that I would bring any valuable documents into this yard at any particular time; it was all impromptu."

"You have not yet explained just why you should transact such business in the open?"

"I can do so with no trouble. I was not expected at my office this morning, because I had left word that I would not be down until afternoon. There were two reasons; one embraced a desire to meet my daughter's affianced, Mr. Charles Bradley. He reached New York this morning early from Chicago, and the young people were to ride horseback at ten. I also expected a call from one of my partners, concerning the transference of some accounts. All in all, the morning might well have been a busy one. I had breakfast quite early. Little Margey annoyed me greatly in my office upstairs. She was playing in the room, as she is prone to do, for she seems to have taken a great liking to me. It occurred to me that if we went down to the garden, she could play and I might squeeze in a bit of work."

"You took only the bonds with you?"

"Only the bonds. There were figures I desired to verify. I had some loose sheets of paper upon which I wanted to figure. They are still on the table, as you can see."

They walked to the side hedge, and Minton reached for the matted, green leaves. An entire section responded to his touch and fell outward. Dexterous hands had cut the main twigs and branches, and while the chunk of foliage could be braced back into place, it could be as easily and as swiftly pulled out, leaving an opening large enough to admit an average person.

"You saw the man plunge through this place?" Nick Carter asked.

"I did; I saw his heels."

"But he did not stop to replace the clipped hedge?"

"Oh, no; I did that."

"Did you not make an attempt to stop the fellow? By looking through the hedge you might have watched his movements, even followed him?"

"My only glimpse of the rascal was the one from the table where I stood, dumfounded. He was looking back across the top of the hedge."

"You say he had no hat. Have you found any hat?"

"I have seen none; I have not looked carefully."

"Can you give me a detailed picture of as much of the face as you saw?"

"I am afraid that it will be of little assistance to you. It was simply one of those momentary glimpses. That there was a peculiar fascination about the eyes I will admit. They were dark eyes, with very heavy brows, and yet, to be honest, I should not be able to point out the owner of those eyes in a crowd. Remember, the hedge cut off the entire lower portion of the face, and the sunlight in that spot was dazzling."

"What of your niece, Margey? She must have seen the man. She was playing in the yard, you say, at the time. She screamed?"

"Nothing had happened to the child. She was simply frightened when the chairs and ink were overturned. She is not old enough to appreciate the incident."

"Where was Margey when you saw her first, after turning from the house door?"

"On the opposite side of the yard from the opening in the hedge. She was playing with the kodak. I had left it on the chair after fitting in the film, and she picked it up out of curiosity, as children will do."

"When you saw her she held the kodak?"

"Yes."

"Where is that machine?"

"Why?"

"I want it."

"But, Mr. Carter, there were no pictures taken, I—I——"

"Mr. Minton, in several previous cases accidental snap shots have helped a case. I could mention a dozen, I believe, after consulting my index files. I want the kodak."

"It is still here—Margey dropped it by the hedge; let me see, yes, there it is."

Minton hurried across the lawn and picked a neat, old-fashioned box kodak from the grass. It was a four by five capacity and almost new. The detective picked it up and glanced at it critically. He opened the trap in the rear and glanced at the little black circle.

"You had turned the film to number one?" he asked.

"I did that, yes. I knew Grace would want it for the drive. She was to have taken some snaps immediately after the drive."

"Mr. Minton, will you ask one of your servants to tell my chauffeur, Danny, to come to me immediately?"

The wish was speedily granted and Danny, very much interested, faced his chief.

"I shall not continue my drive this morning, Danny," the sleuth declared; "take this kodak around to Finch's. Tell him I said to develop the strip immediately; not a second to lose. He should turn it out for us in about an hour if he goes at it at once. If there is even the slightest suggestion of a negative, have him print a copy. Then return. The lever is so arranged that it is impossible for me to tell whether it has been snapped. Go in the machine. On your way from Finch's stop off at the house; give this note to Chick."

"I can do it while the developing is on, Mr. Carter."

"Anything for speed."

Nick Carter scribbled a hurried note on a page torn from his notebook. It read as follows:

"CHICK: No. — Riverside drive. Big case. Murder and heavy theft. Investigate number mentioned. House supposed to be closed for summer. Remain in vicinity until I see you. Am next door.

"NICK CARTER."

Brimming with new life, Danny hustled around the side of the house.

The detective smilingly greeted his client.

"You will pardon me?" he inquired affably.

"That goes without saying, sir."

"To return to the bonds. Do you suspect any servant in your household? What is your retinue?"

"I have three men, all of whom are reliable, and have been with me for a long period. My housekeeper is a woman of mature years. Since my wife's trip to Europe she has handled everything beautifully."

"Then you have no suspicions of your own?"

"None whatever, Mr. Carter. I have never been more mystified in my life."

"It is indeed strange."

"I am wondering, sir, all this while, why you should not be most interested in the murder?"

"It is a secondary consideration?"

"How can you say that?"

"I know it must be. I knew it from the moment you calmly insisted that we talk over the bond disappearance. I could see from your manner that, while it may have upset you, it was not actually vital."

"You are, in a measure, correct. One of the three servants was killed."

"I half suspected as much."

"His name was Ephus Saxton. He was a man well along in years; fifty, I should say. He has been in our family for twenty-five years."

"What were his duties?"

"He cared for the horses. We have four. The stable is in an adjoining lot to the old Axminster mansion."

"Did he drive for you?"

"Yes, he was an expert horseman; had been raised with horses. He was a fine coachman."

"Where is the body now?"

"I will show you, although it makes me sad to see poor Ephus cut down in that way. I loved him; all of us did."

Silently, through the now quiet and uncanny house, the two walked to a small serving room off the main hall on the ground floor. At one end of this room there was a double closet, heavily hung with two dark curtains. Nick later learned that it was used by the servants for their costumes and jackets. The dining room was two doors down.

"I would ask you to open the curtains, Mr. Carter," Minton requested. "I would rather not. You are more accustomed to this sort of thing than I."

Nick Carter stepped forward, flinging the double curtains aside.

He was scarcely prepared for the sight that was presented to his view in the dim light.

The slender figure of old Ephus was hanging by a thin silken cord from one of the inside hooks of the closet. His face had swung around and the set face stared outward from the darkness; eyes almost lifelike in their glassy gaze.

After that one swift look, Nick Carter dropped the curtains back in place.

"You might have thought it suicide," he said.

Minton shook his head.

"Did you see the marks?" he asked.

"You mean around the neck?"

"Yes; the man was choked."

"He most certainly was."

"Who first found the body?"

"The second man—I call him 'Hickory.' His father was an old English woodcutter. I was still in the yard, examining all the ground out there, when Hickory chased out, like a crazy man. He screamed to me that he had found Ephus dead in the closet, then he ran for the house again. I guess he was out of his mind from fright when he tumbled in front of your machine. He wanted to summon help."

"There is one thing that may have been overlooked," Nick Carter declared as Minton finished. "Did you see the chalk scribble on the floor?"

Minton was suddenly astonished.

"Why, no."

The detective drew aside the curtains. Then he pointed down to the dim floor, upon which he turned his pocket flash.

"They are adding insult to injury," was his comment, as the keen glare brought into relief a mysterious message that had been run off on the closet floor boards with a piece of chalk.

"And this isn't all, either."

CHAPTER III.

PICTURES—AND OTHER THINGS—DEVELOP.

"We must have missed that in the excitement," Minton declared, stepping back from the scene of the crime. "And yet I do not see how we could."

"That message was written less than an hour ago, sir."

"What!"

"That is what I mean."

"I am at a loss to understand you, Mr. Carter."

"It is very easy, sir."

"You will have to explain."

"If the chalk message had been written at the time old Ephus was suspended from that rope, his last struggles would have broken the lines; smeared them, as his shoes slipped and slid upon the boards. If you will get down on hands and knees and examine the floor directly beneath the servant's feet, you will see that his rough shoes clattered and scarred the wood."

"Do you think that the murderer returned to the scene of his crime and took the trouble to write that silly, threatening message?"

"I am theoretically positive. Ephus came to the closet for a blue jacket—a jacket with brass buttons. He reached for it, but was grabbed by the throat from the rear before he could secure anything whatever. That throttling grasp about his windpipe cut off any alarm he might have sounded. He was choked into partial insensibility, and a most obvious way to kill Ephus without a shot was suggested at the first view of the cord. It was cut from that piece now hanging from the third peg in the corner. I will turn my flash to these various points that you may the better follow me."

"These deductions, Mr. Carter, are coming with astounding rapidity. You must possess a very keen pair of eyes."

"Merely a matter of business, sir. Two and two make four. Deduction in the unraveling of crime is a science. It can be studied and worked out with almost mathematical correctness. There is a reason for everything. Our murderer, knowing that Ephus had gone to the closet, followed him. The door had been left open, yet it was rather gloomy in here. His back was turned as he reached for the blue coat."

"But how can you tell it was the blue coat? The servants have other coats on the hooks."

"I will show you. Look at this side, the button side; see the string hanging down, when suddenly grasped from behind. Ephus had the coat just there and his snatching fingers pulled away the button. In the right corner the button is still lying; a brass button, if you please. The murderer must have had a knife, for with it he cut off a piece of the silk cord. It was a dull knife; look at the shred of the silk; he was compelled to hack away for some moments, during which his victim lay in a partial state of insensibility on the closet floor. The old man might have been stabbed. That would have been a mussy job. Strangulation was safe and clean. Presto, we have our guilty man whipping a noose around the old servant's neck, attaching the other end to the highest hook. Ephus was unable to resist, yet in his feeble condition, his feet just touching the floor, he squirmed and writhed in his dying moments. He might have done this, intermittently, for ten or fifteen minutes. It is highly improbable, therefore, Mr. Minton, that the murderer would wait around in this grewsome closet for the end to come. He knew that death would surely come in time and that the closet was not very apt to be visited. The writing on the floor, it is my theory, was done, not by the murderer, but by another party, perhaps some one not directly wishing for, or connected with, the death of Ephus."

"But why should any one want to kill him at all?"

"Were any of the other servants jealous of him?"

"On the contrary, they dearly loved the old man."

"Has he relatives in town?"

"All of his people are dead except a nephew, who now resides in London."

"Have you settled any amount on Ephus?"

"It was unnecessary. His race dies with him."

"Did you entrust him with any financial secrets? Did he know, for instance, that you were changing your bank relations?"

"He did not."

"Did he know the bonds were in the house?"

"No."

"Then it would appear that one of our first undertakings is to discover a motive for the murder of the old servant. While the writing on the floor is a warning, and implies that this was done as a preliminary suggestion as to what might follow, I am inclined to believe that Ephus *did* have an enemy in his own right."

"You must work it all out in your own way, Mr. Carter. I confess that my head is in a whirl. I have been calm, yet at heart the tragedy of the thing grieves me more than I may tell. We all loved old Ephus; perhaps that was why they——"

"No, sir, that was *not* the reason."

"I can't understand there being any other cause."

"Still, Mr. Minton, your very words imply that you know of, or suspect, a planned campaign against you and your house. Have you received any warning letters?"

"Never, sir; never."

"In your fruit business, have there been rivals——"

"Absolutely none. My concern and myself are at

peace with the world. We meet competition honestly and with honest methods; we do not kill it."

"Then, sir, you can't imagine, ransacking every suspicious event back through the years, why this thing should be?"

"I cannot."

"Do you associate the murder with the bond theft?"

"I wouldn't dare speculate; possibly so. They happened suspiciously close together."

"Ephus was killed during the night; the body is quite cold and rigid."

Nick Carter made a further investigation of the closet, its contents and the body of the ill-fated old man. Everything of interest, however, has already been stated, with the single exception of the little brown square envelope with a peculiar address in one of the inside pockets of what was certainly old Eph's blue jacket. The envelope was of manila paper, square in shape and of an off size, not usually seen. It had been once crumpled and then smoothed out. The address was typewritten in a rather crude fashion, as if by one not well acquainted with a machine. Eph's full name appeared, but nothing more. It could not have come through the mails without having been enclosed in a second envelope. Carter took possession of the clue. He caught a whiff of the stables on the coat and took careful mental note of this for future consideration.

One by one the remaining members of the household were questioned by the detective. Little Margey could tell nothing of the man of the garden. She simply knew, in a frightened way, that while playing with her dollies and the kodak across by the hedge he had suddenly appeared, snatched at the table, whirled around, stumbling over the chairs and disappeared again in the wink of an eye. She did not remember how he was dressed, whether he was smooth shaven or not, and had screamed as a little child might at the intrusion. Yes, at the time she had seen the "man" she had liked Cousin Grace's picture machine and wanted it as a table for the dolls. Her mother and father, Nick discovered, were not at the house. The mother was being operated upon for appendicitis at a large local hospital and the father remained with the sick woman.

"Hickory" was questioned next. He was still suffering from the nervous strain, and, being an old man also, the excitement of the episode in the road had completely shattered his self-possession. He did not know that Ephus had any enemies; he had never heard of any. Where had Ephus been during the night? Well, he had been seen in the servants' quarters around six o'clock the night before. He was not noticed after that. Sometimes, yes, he slept in a room over the stables. At five in the afternoon Hickory thought that Eph went across to the stables to fix up the horses that Miss Grace and her affianced were to ride the next morning. Why had he, Hickory, gone to the closet? He wanted his white jacket, of course. He opened the door, saw the dangling body and ran out immediately to the garden where his master was seated.

At a quarter past eleven, Charles Bradley, Miss Minton's affianced, reached the house. He apologized for being nearly an hour late, but gave as excuse that the Chicago train had been delayed and he could come no sooner. He was a young fellow, well put up, smooth shaven and rather good-looking. All were ushered into the front parlor, where Bradley was apprised of what had taken place. He seemed very much surprised, but as Nick Carter watched him scrutinizingly he imagined that the surprise was not as sincere as it might have been. The young fellow had a peculiar way of squinting his eyes when he talked, until scarcely any of the pupils was visible. It was a nervous affliction and detracted from an otherwise attractive face. While young, he was almost bald, a dab of hair on either side being the sole remaining vestige of what had once been light brown thatch. He was excessively affable.

Grace Minton could throw no additional light on the series of mysteries. She had been upstairs in her room at the time the first discoveries were made and had heard of them only through her father.

The two young people went for their horseback drive, despite the upset condition of things, and Nick Carter standing at the bay window, admired the handsome pair as they rode away.

These preliminary matters having been attended to, the detective communicated with headquarters, asking that the affair be handled in a quiet fashion. Danny drove up in the car at this juncture. He was taken to Mr. Minton's own office, where the detective and millionaire were seated. Danny was plainly excited.

"I have been to Finch's," he said; "here is what he gave me. He thinks you must be crazy."

Eagerly Nick Carter reached for the envelope. Inside was a kodak negative and a blurred print, still damp from the chemicals. Finch had made quick time.

An exclamation of gratification came from the detective.

He pounded the table triumphantly with the flat of his hand as Minton approached, looking over his shoulder.

"Margey is our only salvation," Nick burst out; "she is indeed our unofficial aide. Look at this."

Upon the damp print an indistinct reproduction of a remarkable scene was reproduced. A portion of a hedge, and a face peering over it. Even as Minton had seen a face peer back across the hedge, the kodak had reproduced one, with only the eyes and top of a head showing. There was a light streak, and other blemishes, but the hedge and face were fairly distinct.

"Margey must have held the kodak in such a position as to catch your man at exactly the second you saw him," the detective cried; "her sleeve or even her nervous little fingers may have pressed the lever. It turns both ways. Of course, no attempt had been

made to adjust the distances. I see the scale marks off only a dozen or more feet, and the child stood farther from the hedge than that; consequently it is not a good print, but it will serve our purpose excellently. Sometimes, quite by accident, a clue is thus acquired; the kodak has helped me before; it will help me now."

All this time Mr. Minton had been gazing over the detective's shoulder in utter fascination, his eyes fastened upon the print. When he spoke, it was to still further complicate one of Nick Carter's most peculiar and puzzling cases.

He snatched the print from Nick's hands, looked at it in every light, running to the window and bringing it back, adjusting a different pair of glasses.

Turning to Nick, he said, now with some composure:

"Mr. Carter, I regret that I must disappoint you, but that is *not* the face I saw over the top of the hedge."

"Are you sure, sir? It must be the face."

"I insist that it is not."

"But you yourself stated that you could not identify the man if you should see him in a crowd."

"I said that, but I also said that I did see his matted, unkempt hair. This man," and Minto held out the snap shot, "is bald—as bald as an eagle, and then the eyes—look at the eyes."

CHAPTER IV.

A MOST PECULIAR ACCIDENT.

It must not be supposed for an instant that Nick Carter had forgotten Minton's brief account of the face above the hedge; but, in a spirit of candor, he placed no great reliance on that description. It is an astonishing fact that one person out of a thousand has the ability to correctly describe a face seen under such conditions. Brown hair will loom up as black, smooth shaven as the opposite, and numerous other incongruous and humorous differences that would not seem possible for a pair of normal, intelligent eyes.

"You are ready to state for a certainty, sir," the detective insisted, "that this is not a snap-shot likeness of the face you saw over the hedge. The picture coincides perfectly with your story."

"It is not the man, Mr. Carter."

"Do you think the fellow might have worn a wig?"

"I see no reason why he should."

"You said something about the eyes. Please continue."

"The eyes are not at all the same. This picture shows a man with squint eyes; the pupils are scarcely discernible. The eyes I saw as I looked were large and glaring. You will remember that I mentioned their fascination."

"I remember, yes. Still, this fellow could have changed his expression after you saw him, just for a second he may have squinted in the strong sunlight, for the light was blinding, was it not?"

"The morning dawned excessively warm."

"There is one sure test, Mr. Minton. I am inclined to think you are correct. If you are, then we have another baffling mystery to contend with. Will you accompany us to the garden?"

On their way downstairs Nick questioned Danny.

"There were no other suggestions of snaps on the twelve-roll film?"

"No, sir."

"Finch was sure?"

"He told me to tell you they were all blanks."

"Did you stop at the house?"

"Yes, sir; I delivered the note to Mr. Chickering."

"What did he say?"

"He smiled, looked surprised and said he would attend to it right away."

Once in the garden, while Minton and Danny waited, seated on the lawn chairs, Nick Carter, the photograph in one hand and his enlarging glass in the other, circled the entire stretch of hedge, examining a leaf here, pushing back a bit of foliage there, and constantly referring to the snap-shot picture at the same time. He finally gave an exclamation of satisfaction. He stopped a foot on the other side of the tropical tree, which stood on the Otter side of the garden, about midway. Turning, he glanced quickly in two directions.

"Where were you standing exactly," he asked, "when you saw this face over the hedge?"

"In the far doorway," Minton responded.

"You will please stand, as nearly as you can recall, in exactly the position you occupied then?"

Minton did so.

"Now please look in my direction."

Carter thrust a piece of white paper back of the hedge, allowing a section to jut above the top.

"I am looking," Minton went on.

"Can you see me, sir, standing as I am partially behind this tree?"

"I can see a portion of your body, yes."

"Can you see a bit of white paper over the hedge?"

"No, there are leaves in the way."

"That will do, sir. The snap shot we have secured so neatly was from this viewpoint. While a face may have appeared, simultaneously with the other face, which you did see, you could not glimpse it, as I have just demonstrated. Little Margey, however, standing back across the lawn and swinging the kodak around carelessly, in her fright, was in a position to catch anything, except it be hidden absolutely by the hedge."

"How did you find that spot, Mr. Carter?"

"By studying the picture. There were differences in the leaves of the hedge. If you will look on the snap-shot, using my glass, you will note that just below the face there are three leaves, almost identical and side by side, lined up, military fashion. They grow from a single stem that bends quickly backward into the hedge. I simply had to find those three leaves and the particular twig, which I did, guided by the

belief that if there had been two peeping Toms, common sense would have prompted at least one of them to look from a vantage point—that is, from behind not only the hedge, but the tree, which he did."

"Very sensible reasoning, sir."

"We are going now, for the time being, Mr. Minton," Nick Carter concluded. "I would consider it a favor if you would make out a detailed memorandum of those bonds. Give me all the requisite facts and figures. In the meanwhile, under no condition exploit their loss. Keep the theft quiet until I advise you to the contrary."

"I shall do as you desire."

"Another thing—I wish the address of your old bank, the one from which you withdrew."

"You will be amused when I tell you. It is the Brevert Safe Deposit Co. It is situated three blocks from my wholesale place down town."

"How long have you kept your funds there?"

"I guess fifteen years."

"Never considered going to a larger institution?"

"No. I knew Brevert himself, and appreciated the fact that his establishment was upon wonderfully strong ground. Understand me, I have nothing against them down there."

"You must have had reasons for wishing to change?"

"I may have."

"Would you mind telling me, sir?"

"My reasons have nothing to do with the affairs of to-day. They are purely personal, Mr. Carter."

"Nevertheless I consider it important to know. What you tell me I shall use for business purposes only, to benefit you. I do not weigh your words from any other basis than that of a strictly commercial character. We cannot work in the dark."

"If you must know, it was principally because of Tom Brevert, the old man's son."

"Ah, I see."

"Tom has been calling upon my daughter. She did not like him and I never could tolerate the boy. His father is a gentleman, but Tom Brevert is the scum of the earth."

"And you told him to cease his calls?"

"I most assuredly did."

"Were there words?"

"Tom took it nicely. He said 'All right,' and left. I have not seen him since."

"How long ago was that?"

"A week, I guess."

"You did not see Tom in that interval?"

"No, I'm sure of it."

"But you saw his father daily, I presume? Did you mention what you had done to Mr. Brevert, Senior?"

"Not until Brevert first spoke to me."

"What was his comment?"

"Nothing much of anything, but I could see that he was hurt. He admitted that Tom was a bad, dissolute boy."

"Then why should you withdraw your business from the institution?"

"Because of Brevert's strange conduct. While always pleasant, he kept away from me, avoided me. He never called again at my house after that, although once it was his custom to do so at frequent intervals."

"You did not do this all at once—the removal of the business?"

"No, by degrees. I came to the conclusion that it would be mutually better if we were not forced to meet either socially or in a business way. While recognizing the faults of his son, blood was thicker than water just the same. He had the idea that it was a 'like father—like son' business and it cut his pride, an abundance of which the old gentleman possesses."

"Would this move on your part cripple him?"

"I should say not. He is very rich in his own right. His wife is a Kertingham, and I guess Mary Kertingham was left a million at the time of her father's death."

"The bonds were removed last, I think you told me?"

"They were."

"Has Brevert asked you why you did these things?"

"No. If anything, I would say that there was a certain mild relief circulating through it all."

Nick Carter did not comment upon what he had heard one way or the other. He had jotted down the name and address of the small downtown bank, however, and thanked a very smiling Fate that he had not left the house before securing this, the most vital information of the day.

Danny had the machine ready and they jumped in. Nick motioned down the drive.

"I want to see if Chick has arrived yet; we might spot him," the detective declared.

"I scarcely think he'd have time, Mr. Carter," Danny responded.

"Then we'll spin up and back until he does come. I want to see the lay of the land around here, especially the Reverend Otter's residence, there to our right, and the one opposite. Later we shall visit the Minton stables."

"This will stop your vacation, won't it, sir?"

"Danny," the detective returned a bit wearily, "I am afraid that I am never destined to go on a vacation. Some people in this world are born to work; tied to it by a startling play of Fate and Chance and Luck, if we can use that shadowy trio. It is a fortunate thing that I like my work, and that I am physically constituted to keep at it unceasingly."

"It certainly is, Mr. Carter."

"Hello, what's that?"

The detective partially stood up in the car, straining forward. They had spun easily along ten blocks or so. Straight ahead, upon the cool, tree-lined bridle-path, a crowd of people had collected. Dust was billowing across the road and a mounted policeman was to be noted.

"Guess it's an accident," Danny speculated.

"I'm not over the nerve shock incident to the narrow escape we had from running old Hickory down."

"Shall I run up and stop?"

"You might, for a moment only, until we discover what has happened."

They were not long in doing so, and the sight was a thrilling and serious one, coupled, furthermore, with the very case upon which Nick Carter was even then investigating. Miss Grace Minton had been thrown from her horse to the bridle path and injured. That was the first thing they discovered. A physician had been hurriedly summoned and was attending her. Her affianced, Mr. Bradley, was also in attendance. Nick, without alighting from the machine, called to a bicycle policeman who was keeping back the curious crowds.

"How did this happen, Masters?" he inquired.

"Good morning, Mr. Carter. A runaway. Young woman injured."

"Do you know who she is and her address?"

"Yes. The gentleman with her told us that."

"But how did the accident happen?"

"I saw the whole thing. I was riding up on my wheel and the two of them, the man and the young lady, were cantering along quietly enough. Then, all in a jiffy, her horse began to kick and thrash about. She lost complete control of him and he made a wild plunge for the main road, striking a tree. She was thrown off, but I don't think it's very serious. She fell on the grass and soft earth, and didn't strike the tree at all."

"And you didn't see anything to frighten the horse?"

"Not a thing."

"Very strange, isn't it?"

"Deucedly strange, I would say, yes, sir."

"Watch the car, Danny," Nick Carter concluded, his manner undergoing a change. "I believe I was right when I thought a visit to the stables was necessary. I'll just make sure."

CHAPTER V.

SOMETHING FOUND IN THE STABLES.

The officer of the bicycle squad followed Nick Carter through the crowd to the place where the two horses had been tethered to a tree. The mounted policeman had chased the runaway and brought the animal ridden by Grace Minton back to the scene of the accident.

Nick desired to make a certain investigation before anything else. Once reassured that Miss Grace was not dangerously hurt, he thought it wise not to interfere with the arrangements already being taken.

"You might say to Bradley that they can use my machine to carry the young woman home in," Carter did suggest to Masters, who conveyed the information. He returned instantly.

"They want to thank you, Carter," the officer stated. "And now what are you after?"

"I want to look at something here a minute."

"Can I help you," asked Masters, his brow wrinkled with perplexity.

"No, thank you."

Nick went at once to the panting, foam-flecked animal. There was a long gash across one flank, where the spirited horse had collided with the tree in its first mad plunge. Carter also bore witness to the impatient, nervous pawing of the beast. It would not, could not stand still.

With no comment, he lifted the blanket beneath the bright saddle. He was compelled, however, to unstrap everything. He next removed the saddle, throwing it upon the grass strip between the bridle path and the second road.

"Right!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?" Masters inquired, marveling.

Nick Carter pointed to the horse's back, just where the saddle had rested. Blood was matted into the short hair in a broad, dark blot.

"See that?" the detective inquired.

"I should say I do; the horse has been wounded."

"It's the old game worked in a very nasty way, Masters. No wonder the poor beast couldn't stand it any longer. I want you to look at this. How is it, from a humanitarian point?"

Nick lifted the saddle, displaying its under side. A piece of padded leather had been worked under the first layer and through this, a sharp nail, an inch in length, sharpened to a fine point. It was slightly bent now, but there was no questioning the excruciating pain it had caused. Before the weight of the rider pressed long upon it, the point would only work down in a gradual way; but, sooner or later, that deadly weapon must pierce leathers, pads, blanket and all.

"Worst I ever saw, Carter."

"Cruelty of the fiendish class. I have seen it tried before, and it never fails."

"But what made you think it was there?"

"I had certain suspicions from the start. There is devilry afoot down at Minton's house. Have you been down yet?"

"No, I'm not wise."

"A murder."

"Great Cæsar! is that on the level? And this—this piece of business. Do you know your man?"

"I shall make it my business to find him. Why, that horse would have run away with a crowned head, once the needle-point pierced the blanket."

"You can see the place where it entered an inch deep."

"Say, Masters, keep this quiet if you can."

"If you're on the case, and I can help you in any way, you know I'll do it, Mr. Carter."

"I thought so, Masters. Get this crowd out as soon as you can. They're taking the girl away in the machine now. As for the horses, you know where the Minton stables are, I'd run down there with them. See you later."

"All right, Mr. Carter."

Nick did not follow the little procession in the wake of the automobile for the very good reason that he had chanced to see Chick on the opposite side of the bridle path. Chick was in disguise—and a good one. He carried a tripod, with a case slung over one shoulder, and might well have passed for a photographer. As soon as he, in turn, caught a glimpse of his chief, he ambled across to the riverside wall walk and ran down the stone steps of an opening by which the park could be reached. There, protected from general view, he was joined by Carter.

"Out looking for groups and store fronts?" Nick chuckled.

"Best thing I could think of; made it easy for me to fuss around the house you wanted me to size up."

"Then you got your stuff?"

"As much as there was to get, and very little at that, Nick."

"You saw the hole in the hedge to the rear?"

"Oh, yes. Clever stunt, that. It had been cut with big shears, and a solid chunk could be lifted out."

"Any footprints?"

"None. Long grass that hasn't been cut in weeks ran right up to the hedge. So far as I was able to see, there were no prints of any kind. Of course you could walk through there without stirring it up much."

"See anybody?"

"The caretaker."

"What sort of a person?"

"Not bad-looking. Young fellow, say thirty. Scotchman, with an honest pair of eyes."

"Did you question him?"

"He saw me coming down the side strip with my tripod and trappings and came out from the rear of the house. We talked a while and I asked him if it wasn't lonely. He said it was, as he was entirely alone in the big house. The folks are not expected back in a month or two. The front part of the mansion is boarded up. The Scotchman lives in the rear, probably in one of the small rooms off the kitchen."

"And he said there was no one else at all?"

"He did."

"Could you quiz him concerning possible visitors in the yard during the morning?"

"It was unnecessary. When I reached the house he had landed only about twenty minutes before. He had gone over to Broadway for a basket of provisions. Went as early as six or six-thirty."

"Then the house was left alone all this while?"

"I presume it was; but look at the big iron gate in front and the fencing."

"You said there was one thing alone of interest to me; you have not mentioned it yet?"

"No, Nick, I have not. I'm afraid you'll laugh at me."

"I guess we can refrain from unnecessary merriment. Go ahead."

"While I was talking to the Scotchman I happened to look up at the side of the house, and——"

"Just a moment; the side facing the Minton mansion?"

"Yes. There is a small, circular window three stories up in a sort of cupola or projection from the lowest section of the roof. I am willing to go on oath that I saw a face at that window; the ghostly apparition of a face, nothing more, and it was looking down at us with an expression I shall never forget."

"Could this have been a freak of light and shade; a glint of sunlight reflected upon the window glass?"

"It was not, Nick; I know it."

"Did the Scotchman notice your surprise?"

"I was under perfect control. I simply looked away again when the face disappeared."

"And repeated your question concerning any other occupant of the house?"

"Yes, I mentioned it in repetition."

"The man stuck to his story?"

"In every respect."

"Could you distinguish the features plainly?"

"No. A scant glimpse, barely enough to make it out as a face at all."

"This is very strange indeed, Chick."

"That is what I was thinking. Especially in view of the fact that I believe the Scotchman told me the truth."

"We shall have to look into the little mystery. To-night is as good as any time. I want you to tackle another end of the case now for me, Chick. Here is an address; it's a small trust company and banking establishment in the lower section of town, west side. Look it over, find their rating, and if you have an opportunity to become acquainted with a certain young Tom Brevert, do so. I want to learn all about him. At one time he was acquainted with Grace Minton, loved her;" and the detective went on to tell the gist of incidents, as related by Minton, earlier in the day. "Patsy I shall want to hang around in the Minton house, and I shall send him there as soon as I can get the car and return. I am not at all pleased with certain phases of our young friend Mr. Bradley, of Chicago. One thing interests and puzzles me more than any other factor; the face in the snap shot bears a startling resemblance to Mr. Bradley himself. The squint is identical in both prints and then the lack of hair. Both men were bald."

"Which way are you going?"

"To the Minton stables, below the house."

"Where can I communicate with you?"

"Possibly not directly. You can telephone to Joeph, at the house."

"Guess I'd better not ride back in the machine."

"No, no; the worst thing possible."

Danny had drawn up the car across the street from the house. A few people were talking in front of the Minton residence, but Nick did not enter. He boarded the car and gave Danny instructions to streak it for Madison Avenue at a fast clip.

It was well along in the afternoon.

"Was Miss Minton hurt very badly?" the detective inquired.

"An arm broken."

"That all?"

"A few minor bruises and scratches."

"You got her safely to the house?"

"Oh, yes; the physician accompanied us, and Mr. Bradley."

"Had Bradley anything to say?"

"Very little. He appeared to be laboring under some mental shadow. He squinted and scowled and sometimes mumbled to himself, but there was no making out what he said."

"Did he know that a snag had been placed under the saddle of the horse ridden by his affianced?"

"I didn't know it myself until you told me. Mr. Bradley made no comments on that subject whatever."

This concluded all that Nick desired to know relative to the ride in the auto. When his Madison Avenue home was reached he went promptly up to his office and had an appetizing cup of tea and a plate of cold sliced meat. With a fragrant cigar, at the conclusion of this quiet repast, he went over, bit by bit, the different phases of the case.

What his conclusions were at this particular time we shall know in the course of our story. Let it suffice that nothing has been kept from the reader, and that as different theories occurred to the detective, he jotted them down in his red memorandum book, to be read aloud later, when he should be able to rally around him Chick and Patsy.

It was quite dark when he left the house, bound for the Minton stables. For this occasion he had deemed it wise and expedient to change his personal appearance somewhat, although of late years the matter of disguise had not been a heavy factor in his numerous adventures. The battles of the brain in modern crime require no old-fashioned and ponderous make-ups. Men fight with their wits, not with grease paint and wig.

A surface car was brought into play for a share of the distance, tediously grinding out the miles up Broadway. Soon, however, Nick alighted and walked down to the drive when within five or six blocks of the Minton mansion.

He recognized the stables instantly as he walked down the house side of the roadway, beneath the shadows of the overhanging trees. It was a very dark night, but between the blank wall of another dim apartment house and the two vacant lots, bowlder strewn and weed grown, an electric arc sputtered from a pole over an arch of masonry—the carriage entrance. The same stone work completely surrounded the lot, but apart from the obviously new stables, glittering white from fresh paint, the three connected lots were quite neglected and unprepossessing. The light in front was the only one, and doubtless was left turned on all night. The buildings, some fifty feet back from the sidewalk, were dark and apparently empty.

Nick Carter tried the iron gate under the stone arch. It had been padlocked.

He thought for a few moments and decided to jump right over the wall and enter. He wore leggings, riding breeches, an ordinary white shirt and a rather short corduroy brown coat. In one hand he held a riding crop.

He looked, in an unassuming but convincing manner, like a man who knew horses from A to Z, and who might have wandered down from either a riding academy in the neighborhood of Columbus Circle or any one of a dozen sales stables.

Without further hesitation, he managed to get a footing in the masonry, and, lifting himself, leaped into the weed-grown space beyond.

A scampering, crackling circle of beetles and bugs, singed by the light, scurried to cover beneath his feet as he gained the path and deliberately walked up it, snapping the crop against his riding breeches with apparent unconcern.

Still there were no lights visible, no suggestion of life within. All was lonely, gloomy and foreboding.

"No one in; good!" he exclaimed.

Repeatedly he had knocked, first at the single door facing the street, then upon the big double stable doors. Recognition of his summons was not forthcoming.

Because of a distorted, gnarled tree—the only one in the yard—throwing its shade across the path of the arc light, the smaller door was in complete shadow. Nick Carter, with his usual skill at picking locks, had no difficulty in gaining immediate entrance. A tepid breath of air swept into his face, heavy with the mixed odors of a stable. He used his flash, closing the door by which he had entered.

They had said that Ephus sometimes slept over the stables. Nick Carter wanted to investigate that room, first and foremost, for certain reasons of his own. The envelope found in Eph's pocket had once contained a letter that might throw light upon his tragic death and the very mysterious transactions of the Riverside house. Looking at it logically, the man would not be apt to leave any letters in the regular servant quarters where nothing was absolutely safe from prying eyes. Neither would he leave it in the closet. For some reason, he had kept the envelope and left the letter, by Nick's method of deduction, somewhere out in the stables, his natural and authentic kingdom.

At the end of a dim little hall a door opened upon two rows of stalls. As he unlatched this door, throwing the beam from his flash straight ahead into the darkness, he heard the stamp of feet and saw, in two of the stalls, the horses ridden by Mr. Bradley and Grace Minton. A bandage, held in place by a belly-band, had been placed upon the ugly back wound. Two pairs of wondering eyes caught the reflection of the flash and gazed over sleek brown and black shoulders at the motionless sleuth.

Actuated by a real sympathy for the beautiful ani-

mal, Nick Carter stepped across the earth floor to the nearest stall, petting the beast with kindly stroke of the hand. A soft whinny and a stir of the wet straw beneath the restless hoofs. As the swinging circle of light centred for one fateful second upon that straw, Nick Carter gave a low cry. Peeping out from its yellow maze, he saw a bit of crumpled paper but that moment turned up by the pawing of a horse's hoof.

CHAPTER VI.

MIDNIGHT PROWLERS.

Eagerly enough, Nick Carter bent forward, clutched the bit of crumpled paper from the straw and raised it to the level of the flash. Nervously, too, he began to spread out the folds, exultant, as he observed that the peculiar shade of paper used in the envelope, already in his possession, was duplicated in this sheet.

But he did not read its contents.

With no warning, a pair of arms encircled him from the rear; arms that twisted downward and around with marvelous strength, bearing him backward to the earth. The lantern went in one direction, the bit of paper in another, and the darkness of the stable at that instant was complete.

Some one had softly entered by the small door, he judged, passed down the hall, and, seeing the light, waited for a crucial moment.

Both men were panting from the fall, yet no word was spoken. There was a grim terror in the entire proceeding.

From the gloom, one of the horses whinnied again and pawed in the bedding. It became still, to a discomforting degree. Nick's only sensation at that moment was one of [illegible] A hand was slowly, mechanically working its way from his waist upward to his throat. The grip did not release for an instant, only that pinching, sliding, snake-like tendency to change position, with the even assurance of the professional strangler. Now the fingers were crawling to his shoulder blade and the other hand was beginning to move.

Nick Carter was no weakling, as we well know. Every trick of muscular play was known to him. As a wrestler, he had the science down to a beautiful degree. One upward wrench of his broad shoulders; one lurch of that powerful back, would have spun his secret and mysterious assailant ten feet across the stable floor.

Yet he quietly refrained.

Something was going to develop. He would rather lead his opponent a chase now, as he had been partially placed or that the hold upon him was completely overpowering. And still those snake-like fingers worked upward. Nick Carter counted the first set of fingers as almost upon his throat. As they scratched across the skin, digging downward, every muscle-fiber of that keen body was writhed in fear and doubt. The detective's forehead appeared to expand as if [illegible]

were of rubber; his chest bulged upward and, at the exact second, he arched his muscular back, turning quickly to the right. A crackling snap, as of bones bent out of place; a guarded but painful cry in the darkness, and Nick knew that what he had anticipated had taken place. In turning so quickly and unexpectedly, one of his assailant's arms and hands—the lower one—had been bent, crushed, squeezed beneath the detective's short but massive body and there was danger of broken bones, to say the least.

The real struggle was on in deadly earnest.

Moreover, that struggle was not destined to be one of long duration in a certain remarkable sense. Unless terribly handicapped, Nick could easily handle three times his weight in criminal flesh. There was nothing to it. He simply had gained knowledge of fight and counterplay at muscles through the longest siege of criminal schooling that man could devise. His two knees were planted on a certain unseen chest and his own fingers had closed over a soft throat, palpitating beneath his flexible fingers.

There was a clattering jangle near the stalls. Had one of the horses kicked his flash? That was Nick Carter's first impression.

For once, he had it wrong.

The inky blackness was cut by a glare of light, flitting from wall to wall, from this position to that, until it spotted the two struggling, rolling, gasping men on the stable floor.

There was another factor on the scene.

A tiptoeing boot had struck Nick's lantern, searching hands found it and the rest was easy. The two wrestlers were not alone.

It was during this momentary illumination of himself and the man under him that Nick saw the face of the night assailant:

A pair of snappy black eyes, staring in their glance and doubly fired from fright, a mop of hair, dishevelled and unkempt, met his gaze. Nick Carter silently muttered the words: "Number one." As Mr. Minton had described the first face over the hedge, here was its duplicate, unquestionably, the man who had stolen the bonds. And now for the other, that hidden prowler beyond, in the stalls manipulating the flash with fiendish satisfaction, yet in darkness himself. Who would number two prove to be?

"What in the devil is this, anyhow?"

A low, explosive, questioning voice came out of the gloom, as if the whole conflict was a matter for deep consideration.

"That's what I'd like to know," Nick Carter briskly answered, a shade of humor in the exclamation.

"Who is that on the bottom?"

"Not a friend, certainly."

"Well, you don't belong around here yourself, do you?"

"I suppose I do if I have a good excuse."

"Let that other man go."

"Glad to, [illegible] tried to choke me."

And such was the astounding turn that events took. Nick Carter raised himself from the choking, sputtering man on the floor and took a hurried step backward to the nearest stall boarding, never for a moment forgetting the location of his two very reliable guns. The spot of light from the flash was concealed, squinted out a thread again, and then a second light, from a stable lantern, brought all objects into relief as it was suspended by the newcomer from a projecting beam.

Nick's hands were half behind him; his eyes flashing to every quarter.

The man who had made the attack was laboriously crawling from the ground and dusting himself. He stood up, feeling of his throat, since the detective had given him a grip in that locality not soon to be forgotten.

He was quite tall, over six feet, angular, long of arms and poorly dressed. From his eyes down his face was bloated out of keeping with the remainder of him; thick lips, double chin, blotched and grizzled, and a flat, bulbous nose well colored by the studied use of alcohol.

As to the other, by comparison, he was actually good looking. He was a young man, rather neatly dressed in a brown business suit, a brown derby and of slender, supple figure. He actually wore patent leathers, over which light brown spats were drawn. Under one free arm he held a sporty cane.

That both men were, in a measure, acquainted, was borne out by events that immediately followed.

"What about him?" the man in the brown suit inquired.

"I came in by the side door. Durned if it wasn't open, too, an' hearin' sounds an' seein' a light, I jest naturally thought somethin' was doin'. He was in here, snoopin'; looked as if he was tryin' something on the horses in the way of dope."

"He'd have laid you out, old man, too, if I hadn't happened in by the carriage door," the brown-suit stranger interpolated. He turned to Nick Carter.

"Any excuse for being here?"

"Yes."

"What, I'd like to know?"

"I came around to see Old Ephus on a matter of business. I know him well."

"What business?"

"It does not necessarily concern you."

"But we've got a right to know. This trespassing on other people's property at night—and with this thing"—holding out the dark lantern—"looks like a case for the police."

Nick ran his bluff a bit further.

"I'm in the horse business; buy and trade. Ephus told me that Mr. Minton was willing to sell these saddle horses and I was interested enough in the proposition to want to look them over. I knew Ephus was generally here about this time."

"You didn't know that the old guy was dead?"

Nick Carter feigned the greatest possible surprise.

"Great heavens, no."

"Well, he is."

"When did this happen?"

"Not long ago; they say he was murdered, but it looks like suicide to me, from what they've reeled off."

The young man in the brown suit was not ignorant, nor did he lack a certain suave self-possession that was tantalizing. He could obviously manage himself in the best of company.

To the detective the presence of the suspicious pair of prowlers was clouded in mystery. In the first place, why should the man with the scraggly hair, after a successful theft of the bonds, return to the neighborhood? It was incomprehensible, except on the ground that he was associated with the murder of poor old Ephus, and in addition, the cloaked threats, still displayed like storm signals in the Minton household.

Was Eph in the habit of entertaining a mixed breed of petty or professional rascals in the stable rooms?

One thing, however, Nick had not forgotten: the bit of crumpled paper. During the catch-as-catch-can fight with the first interloper, it had been spun from his fingers to the straw and earth. So soon as he had gained his feet and the light made objects fairly distinct, he had spotted the bit of paper not more than a yard from him. Inch by inch, during his explanations and excuses, he had drawn nearer that precious scrap until, without arousing suspicion, one foot was pressed over it. That his assailant, also, had sprung upon him simply as a butter-in and in no wise because of the letter, the detective was now prepared to believe.

The chap in the brown suit looked annoyed.

"My private opinion is, friend, that you're a liar," he said bluntly. "That story doesn't sound sensible, now does it? I leave it to you? If you'd knocked and found Ephus wasn't here you'd have left and called around some other time. I think—I think that——"

The sentence was bitten off in a flash.

A revolver sprang into his right hand and it was leveled with deadly aim at the detective's heart. It was one of the quickest, slickest pieces of covering that Nick could recall.

"I think that we shall investigate you, Mr. Horseman; we can't stand for anything like this. Move an inch or try any flim-flam and you're a dead man, as sure as I'm talking."

"You're making a mistake, mister," Nick Carter returned quietly.

"Well, maybe I am, and then again, maybe I'm not. Ford, I've thought it over and we'll take him down to the house. It's some early but I guess we'll gamble it. The boss ought to look this gent over."

Nick could not have hoped for anything better. "The boss" eh? He wanted a look at so important an individual.

He quietly submitted while the man named Ford,

swearing gleefully, roped about his arms, pinioning them behind him. This never greatly worried the sleuth, for, as we have often explained, he had a way of expanding his chest, muscles of the arms and tendons to such a degree that while he appeared to be securely bound, as soon as he relaxed, the cords hung but loosely upon him. It was parallel with the stage magician's trick, and the fake spiritualistic séances. Of course the Little Giant's wonderful development made this three times less difficult.

And now came the most clever act of the night. It looked as if he would not be able to secure the crumpled paper, but he did.

As Ford and the younger man started for the door, the latter still holding his gun in readiness, Nick Carter, for some strange reason, tripped in the straw and tumbled backward with a quick cry, as if of fear. In a moment the two men whipped about, Ford using the flash to see what had taken place.

CHAPTER VII.

MYSTERY IN A MINISTER'S HOUSE.

"He's stumbled or something!"

"Clumsy fool!"

"It may be a game, Ford, look out for him."

They saw the prostrate form of the detective back upon the straw, writhing and twisting and making every effort to gain his feet once more.

"I caught my foot in a hole," he panted, "lend a hand, won't you?"

It was very natural and an accident that might really occur. If they had stopped to analyze the fall, however, they would have questioned why Nick Carter had tripped backward, instead of forward. There was a reason.

His quick eye had calculated distances. Two steps forward and his shoe lifted from the bit of paper, as yet unseen by his enemies. A clever trip and back fall followed, and as he struck the straw one of his hands, in its crumpled, bound position, closed upon the thing he desired, his fingers being unhampered.

They helped him to his feet, but the paper was buried in those fingers, and all three started from the stable, hard closing and locking the side door.

It was an extremely dark night, so dark, in fact, that had it not been for the one arc at the gate, the drive would have been impenetrable for three houses down on that side of the street. A few persons could be heard chattering and laughing over across the wall above the park, but they could not be distinguished. From the river came the occasional hoarse, low, throat shriek of a boat's siren.

"You want to walk right across to the end and don't take any car," the man in brown volunteered. "It's a nice space and we're sure of it all right."

"I'm willing to be put on the car," Nick Carter replied, a hidden meaning in his voice.

They must intend to take him to a place not far distant, Carter knew. But where?

Ford acted as a scout.

He walked casually out to the gate, unfastened it with no demonstration of fear, and looked up and down as far as he could see in the uncertain light.

"It's all clear," he said when he returned.

The gate closed and they went three abreast, hastening to the shadows of the trees. Now they were comparatively safe unless Carter should decide to call for help.

"Remember what I told you," the man in brown whispered.

"I remember," Nick said, in the same guarded tone.

"Easy, there, easy."

This from Ford, and Nick could feel him as his right arm went back to his pocket.

A figure loomed indistinctly ahead, a very unsteady figure, that appeared to be taking up more room than a single man should. The mixed and thick notes of a song floated to their ears from the gloom of the road.

> "For you'll take the high road and I'll take the low;
> And I'll be in Scotland before ye;
> For me an' my true love will never meet again
> On the bonny, bonny banks of Loch Lomond."

"Pshaw! it's nobody but MacGreggor, the Scotchman from the house," Ford laughed in an undertone, "he's drunk again and we can be glad of it. Say, that laddy buck can sure lap up the stuff."

Nick Carter could have shouted.

"I'll gamble a good round sum that they're taking me to the minister's house," he said to himself, "this is unqualifiedly jim-dandy. Luck is with me."

MacGreggor was undoubtedly the very caretaker with whom Chick had spoken the day before. He was headed up the road singing and staggering, but happy all over in a frank Scottish way.

The Scotchman bawled out a stupid "Hello" as he passed, having switched to the bridle path in his staggering gait. He was not answered, and as far back as the wind carried the tune, they could hear MacGreggor's not musical echo and the tail end of:

> "For you'll take the high road, and I'll take the low."

"A fine sort to have in a rich minister's house," the man in brown chuckled. "Why, that Scotchman would ruin the reputation of the finest dominie in the State."

"It's too easy a time that does it," Ford commented.

When the Otter house was reached, the two led Nick Carter past, an entrance being made through a little side gate that was used for delivery men and the like. They blundered along in the dark to the basement to the left of the place, where a low window suggested a means of entrance.

Both were well acquainted with the place to which they were going, and knew exactly how to get there, for the inside of the Rev. Otter's big home became

common property in something like eight minutes. The man in brown used Nick's flash cautiously and only at infrequent intervals, as if afraid that some suggestion of its light reach the street outside. At the same time the detective wondered at their marvelous audacity. They chatted and commented with all the freedom in the world and made no pretense about guarding their footsteps, as two flights of stairs were ascended.

Chick had seen aright, then. He half imagined that a face had appeared in the little circular window. It was not a hallucination, as events were steadily proving.

In total darkness, a door was opened. The shadowy phantom of a light, burning with spiritual uncertainty, threw a soft, warm glow over the room. It came from a squat lamp, held in a red paper box as far away from the one window as possible, while that window, moreover, was a circular one. Across it a heavy cloth had been hung and tucked ingeniously on all sides to prevent escape of light. In the room the illumination was impressive—the half light of a great cathedral seen through colored glass; the mystic lighting of a stage in a spectacular production. All things were magnified by reddish lights and deep purple shadows. It was an odd, outlandish place, too, as Nick Carter soon discerned; a room fitted out with great old religious paintings, doubtless brought from the other side. There were small models in clay of Holy Land structures, spread out in miniature upon stands made especially for them. There were musty old books with hand decorated covers, a quaint, carved ritual stand, gloomily dark and sombre against one of the walls, and a large brass cross. It was heavy and massive and stood some seven feet from the floor in a shadowy corner. Its base was ponderous, and as Nick glanced at it the thought came that it was a religious and historic piece brought, no doubt, from the Holy Land during one of the Rev. Otter's pilgrimages there. The minister was independently wealthy, and his hobby was just this class of ancient relics.

This, and no more, the detective was permitted to see. As his eyes grew more accustomed to the strange light, they fell upon one object alone—the inanimate form of a man crouched back in a great chair, his face partially hidden from the lamp by a screen that had been drawn about him on that side. He did not move as the three entered.

The man in brown took the initiative.

"I'm afraid things ain't going exactly right at the house," he declared.

The figure in the easy-chair stirred.

"What has happened?" came the response.

"I believe Minton has a detective on the case."

"I *know* he has."

"Well, do you think it's safe to hang out here; I'm beginning to——"

"To be afraid?"

"I didn't say that, sir."

"But I know, I know. Tom, you're a coward at heart."

Nick Carter experienced a sudden thrill. Tom—Tom—that name. Tom Brevert, of course; the banker's rowdy son.

If it was actually Tom Brevert, his dander was up in an instant.

"See here," he snarled, "I won't let you talk that way to me; you nor any other man, understand."

"Quiet, Tom, quiet."

"I'll be hanged if I'll be quiet," Tom retorted hotly. "You folks have been trying to throw it into me all along because of that Minton affair. Now I—but what's the use, I didn't come up here to fuss, I came up to help. Ford was down at the stables and we ran into this fellow. It looked suspicious to us, but he had a pretty good story at that. He says he wanted to see Ephus and that he didn't know anything about Eph being dead. It was something concerning a horse deal."

"But he had a dark lantern, cap," Ford interrupted, "that's the one as Mr. Brevert has."

Then this was Tom Brevert.

Things were warming up, slowly but surely.

"Bring him over to the lamp."

It was the mandate of the mysterious personage behind the screen.

Nick made no resistance, but as Tom took him by the arm he held his head high and walked across the room to the little stand. A red glare fell full upon his features and he saw a face, for the first time, around the side of the screen. A face he recognized, wondered at, and which set him to puzzling and guessing and mentally working. The countenance from the eyes up matched little Margey's accidental snapshot as developed by Finch, the photographer; the almost bald head, the squinting and sparkling eyes, once seen not soon forgotten. Of more pregnant interest, however, to Nick Carter was another recognition that clogged the case tenfold. He could not be mistaken, but this face was nearly a facsimile of young Mr. Bradley, Grace Minton's affianced. The similarity of the shape of head, void of much hair, the same eyes and that habit of contracting the eyelids into a squint.

Nick Carter did not flinch beneath that set gaze.

He imagined he heard a slight gasp of astonishment from the direction of the screen as the man spoke:

"Tom, you hit it right."

"We wanted to make sure, sir."

"Your prisoner is Nick Carter."

"What, the detective?"

"Nick Carter, detective."

Ford began to swear softly in an opposite corner.

"How did you know him?" Tom asked excitedly.

"Everybody knows Carter," answered the voice, and there was a slight suggestion of subtle sarcasm in the tone, "he's been to Chicago, Tom."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"Act immediately. We change our plans. We'll leave to-night, beaten, by thunder, beaten."

"Beaten!" Tom Brevert exclaimed in astonishment.

"Yes, literally, yes."

"Put me wise."

"Mr. Carter," the squint-eyed man said, "this will, no doubt, give you much pleasure. We are beaten at our own game."

Nick remained stubbornly silent.

"Not talkative, eh. Tom, we'll close up here and finish that little deal downtown. Then it's out. I didn't expect that cat of mine to appear on the scene as he did. Ford, we'll give Carter an enforced rest. He's in the harness most of the time and he may appreciate it. To-night we leave the house. From what I've seen of the Scotchman he'll not visit this part of the house for a month. Put the gag on Carter and—let's see—ah, I have it, the cross, the cross!"

Carter, just a bit worried, relaxed his muscles and straightened his arms.

Too late. The squint-eyed man noted the move and sprang from the shadows, bellowing a command.

"Watch him, watch him, he can get out of those ropes like an eel; the slickest chap that ever lived! Tom, Ford, quick!"

The defeat was crushing. Ford was a big man, a giant, in fact, and his muscles were not to be despised, while the man with the squint knew his little game. In an incredibly short period Nick Carter had been securely bound and gagged. No mere novices accomplished the task, else he would have given them trump for trump.

"Now the cross," the squint-eyed gentleman rasped.

"What's up?" Tom inquired.

"Tie him to it, nothing better."

And that was the astounding thing they did. The base of the head-high brass relic was fastened to the floor. Nick Carter's arms were stretched out to fit the side arms of the cross, and then wrapped around and around with cord. His feet were pushed together and more rope used at the base. For him to escape singlehanded was absolutely impossible. The cross was of solid brass and five times as heavy as the form dangling from it, his feet just grazing the base. Gag in mouth, ropes cutting into the flesh and hindering circulation, Nick Carter was indeed in a hazardous and alarming predicament.

The three men were panting after their exertion.

Tom Brevert stood off in the half light, smiling as he observed the fruit of their combined labors.

"That's a new one, isn't it?" he sputtered.

"Couldn't get away to save him," Ford growled.

"What is it next, boss?" Tom continued.

"Are you armed?" asked the squint-eyed man.

"I intend to get Charlie, if I lose my soul to-night," he went on; both Tom and Ford having given occular demonstration of their being walking arsenals. "He's in the house yet, I've watched from the window. Kill him, it's a black night on the drive. A run through his pockets and a last stand. It must be done."

"No need of it if that had worked right the other morning," Tom snarled.

"No use going back to regrets; come on now, it's getting late."

With no word in parting to Nick Carter, bound hand and foot to the upright, the light was turned out completely and the three rogues swept noiselessly away, shutting and locking the door of the curio room.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHICK BECOMES CONVINCED.

By five-thirty, Chickering Carter was on his way from Madison Avenue to the lead given him by his chief—the Brevert Safe Deposit Company. If Nick wanted to know a little more of Tom Brevert, Chick believed that he was qualified to obtain that information in short order, provided nothing untoward took place.

The young detective was not in disguise. He had changed his make-up as a surveyor for one of the average successful young business man, and looked, facially, his same keen, handsome self.

It was a long, tedious trip downtown, but shortly before six o'clock he found the number. The institution was in a small two-story brick building, and within a short distance of the markets and wholesale fruit stores of this section.

Old Brevert was as old-fashioned as his quarters, and was stubborn enough to remain where his first successes had been made and to aspire to no lofty marble edifices. There was dust on the two big plate-glass windows in front and the brass letters thereon had tarnished and turned green.

Incongruous relationships were demonstrated during Chick's casual hesitation in front of the bank. Across the street there were weather-beaten little houses, one a print shop, another a small manufacturing interest. Immediately above the building next to the bank, on the right, another dusty window gave amusing display of large falsefaces, papier-mache idols, and fruit and what-nots. There were advertising devices made of pulp paper and hand colored to look like any number of originals. Surely, Mr. Brevert and his associates on that dingy little street had not permitted the cosmopolitan push upward to annoy them in the least. They were doing business at the same old stands, comparatively satisfied and affluent.

Chick did not beat around the bush.

He entered almost immediately, to find himself in a stuffy, odd little place, lined off with wooden railings. There was one cage, much like those found in ordinary banks, and a number of private offices, separated only by the railings. Even the clerks nodded over their desks, and one sleepy-eyed makeshift of a man, watery of eyes and shuffling of tread, came up to Chick.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he inquired.

"Is Mr. Brevert, Senior, in?" Chick asked.

"He is."

"Can I see him?"

"Your card, please."

"Very sorry, but I am out of them. Tell him that Mr. Randolph Mason, of Port Chester, would like a word with him."

The clerk nodded drowsily.

It was growing late and some of the employees were putting on hats and coats, preparatory to leave-taking. A droning clock beat out the half hour as Chick stood behind the rail.

He was ushered into the one inclosed office; a meagre affair, quite in keeping with the remainder of the outfit. He saw, seated at a flat-topped desk, a quaint man, built along a pattern of a generation ago, yet with a pair of kindly, indulgent eyes. Old Brevert was not unprepossessing.

"Mr. Mason, I believe?"

"Yes, sir. I am afraid that I come rather late to speak of business, yet it was unavoidable."

"It is never too late for business, is one of my mottoes," Brevert returned, smiling, "although I will confess that we are a bit worried here to-day."

"Something gone wrong?" inquired the inquisitive Chick.

"I might say so, yes."

"Nothing serious, I trust."

"Only irritating."

Chick was on the point of inquiring the nature of that irritation when the old gentleman himself volunteered the information.

"Small thefts during the past few days," he remarked. "We are well qualified to stand them, but I am beginning to think that we have a petty thief under our very roof. I keep nothing from those who do business with me."

"Theft?" Chick ventured.

"Yes, five hundred dollars taken since early morning."

"From the safe?"

"No, from a counting table in the back room. It is very mysterious."

Chick glanced across the room, to a small ordinary safe. It was one of the commonplace variety and was doubtless a private depository for Brevert's personal affairs. It was in a semi-gloom, caused by overshadowing double-decked account desks with their tall stools.

"I should think a safe of that description could be broken into without difficulty," he suggested.

"It can; we discovered that it had been tinkered with but not opened. I turned the matter over to my son, and he will exchange it for one at the house."

Chick was immensely interested at this very juncture.

"Another one to take its place?"

"Yes, our home safe, not much larger, but I have every reliance in its combination. This old junk is about on its last legs."

"Then out she goes to-night?"

"If Tom follows instructions, yes."

"You do not keep valuables in there, I hope?"

"I keep my personal accounts, Mr. Mason. But, sir, why worry? Come with me, I will show you our safe-deposit vaults. We are not as old-fashioned as we may appear."

They looked over safe and solid vaults that were of the latest type; and returned to the office.

"I am curious to know why you came down here, Mr. Mason," Brevert questioned, removing his glasses and blinking at the clean-cut young man seated opposite. "So few people know of us."

"I am moving into this section, sir."

"Ah, you are."

"Yes, in the Florida fruit business, wholesale."

"Far away?"

"I'm trying to get a store about two streets up."

"Young man, quite a few of us old dodgers have found we could build up a fortune without following the trend uptown. I'm mighty pleased to meet you."

"Thank you, sir."

"But who told you of this concern?"

"I thought I recalled the name—ten years back."

"Ah, is that so?"

"Yes, I think, although I am not sure, that I have met your son, Tom."

"Well, this is a coincidence."

"It was right here in town at one of the clubs. I made inquiries and I learned that there was a banking establishment down in this very part of town under that name, so I came here."

"I'm sorry, Tom is out now."

"I should like to meet him again."

"He will be at the bank to-night."

"At what hour?"

"Shortly after our dinner. He is to attend to the change of safes."

"Suppose I call then at eight or nine. Will any one be here?"

"Both of us."

"At the same time, I shall speak with you concerning the opening of my account."

"We shall be undisturbed, Mr. Mason."

"You do not know where Tom can be found at this hour?"

"Ah, no, Tom is a wild young Indian."

A hearty handshake ended the interview, but Nick Carter had gained some valuable information. Things were not going just right with the old fellow—Small thefts? He had looked over the place and sized it up.

But he would meet Tom, which fact capped everything else.

The outer offices were well nigh deserted as he gained the street, passing down the long corridor-like hall. It was dark outside, and Chick wondered how he should pass the time expeditiously until eight

or half after. It might be wise to return to Madison Avenue and leave word with Joseph as to his operations up to that hour.

With this decision, he started up the street.

A man ran out from the court between the second building and the street, and crossed the paving blocks at a skipping rate of speed, as if fearful of detection. There was something at once sneaky and suspicious in his movements.

"Thunderation, if it isn't Bradley," the detective gasped.

He had recognized that form, despite the darkness.

It was one of those hot trails that kept Chick on the alert every instant. On cars, off cars, by hack for a short distance, and then the subway; but when it had ended at the Grand Mogul Hotel, a small three-story place on Fifty-ninth Street, west, Chick had not lost the scent. He saw his quarry dodge secretly, almost fearfully, into the side entrance and run up a long flight of stairs.

"And Nick suspected the fellow, too," was Chickering's private comment.

It was then twenty minutes after seven.

Bradley would have had sufficient time, after seeing Miss Minton at her home, to transact much personal business up to that hour. Chick knew him from being a witness to the accident on the drive earlier in the day.

Off on one lead, chance had put him on still another.

The detective coolly ascended the steps behind his man. He was just in time to see Bradley unlock a door at the end of the hall, and enter the room.

"I'll wait," was Chick's comment.

Off from the stairs stood a rack built against the wall, upon which lay an open ledger, pen and ink bottle. There was no one in sight. Five, ten minutes passed and a lock clicked down the dim little hall. Chick was writing at the shelf counter. He looked up casually and saw Bradley come out, dressed differently and with more care; he had on a top hat and was immaculate.

With a look, in which Chick imagined he could detect fear and apprehension, Bradley passed on, descending the steps.

"I want to see that room," was Chick's comment.

Making sure that no one was approaching by way of the side stairs, and consumed with amazement that a young man with such swell connections should house himself in a hovel of this kind, the detective tried several keys and finally opened the door, from which he had seen Bradley issue.

It was in darkness.

He found the gas, lighted it, turned the flame quite low, and had a good look around.

The bed had not been touched, the dresser was empty and lacking anything that would suggest an occupant of the room. No trunk could be seen, nothing at all was in view save a dress-suit case thrown carelessly under the bed.

It was far from a comfortable den.

Chick drew the suit case out, fumbled with the lock until it responded to the right catch, and opened it.

Three articles were visible, just three, but they were sufficient to cause Chick to start back and utter a low cry of astonishment. A small black mask with eyeholes, such as is commonly used by the burglarizing fraternity, and two ugly looking revolvers gleaming in the meagre light.

"I've got him, and—I thought so all the time," Chick muttered with unmistakable exultation, as he placed all three back in the case and closed it.

CHAPTER IX.

THE AMBUSH IN THE DARK.

Patsy Garvan, Nick Carter's experienced and proficient assistant, did not return to the Madison Avenue house until nearly ten o'clock. During the late afternoon he had been to headquarters securing some tracings of certain photographs, together with details of a crime that had been committed the week before. After that he had dinner at a favorite little restaurant, for his wife Adeline was visiting in Boston. The last he had heard, Nick was off on a vacation and would be away for perhaps a week, and Patsy was attending to some business of his own.

The very moment he entered the house, Joseph, calm and deliberate, handed over Nick Carter's most recent telephonic instructions.

As the reader knows, these were that Patsy should go to the Minton mansion and watch things until new orders were given.

It was late, but Patsy knew that he must pick up stakes and do as his chief instructed. Danny happened to have the machine still in commission and they were soon on their way up the drive. It was intensely dark, and, while the lights illuminated the road far ahead, Danny did not put on much speed.

"I've been hanging around this quarter for the last twenty-four hours," Danny protested as he let Patsy off a block from the mansion. "I guess I'll go home and have a few bites to eat. If you want me for anything call up Joseph. I'll keep the car so that I can use it at a moment's notice."

Now, to Patsy, the case was more or less of a mystery. A few of the outline facts fired over the wire had been duly set forth by Joseph in his careful manner, yet Patsy was ignorant of much that the others were well acquainted with. It was with profound respect and interest that he walked across the spacious lawn of the big house and ascended the veranda stairs.

A light was burning brilliantly in one of the lower windows, and this gave Patsy assurance that he was not apt to disturb the household.

He rang the bell and waited.

Old "Hickory" answered the summons and stared Patsy out of countenance until the young detective handed him a card and requested to see the master of the house. He was ushered into Mr. Minton's presence a few minutes afterward. Minton had not retired, but was working in his second-floor office by a large desk lamp. He received Patsy most cordially.

"Have a seat, Mr. Garvan," he said, "so you come from Mr. Carter; you are one of his valued assistants."

"He asked me to see you and to look about a bit," Patsy returned. "Has there been anything new?"

"It would seem," Minton sighed, "that disaster after disaster has been fated to fall upon me. You heard, no doubt, of the accident to my daughter, Grace. She was thrown from her horse while out driving with her affianced and we thought her arm had been broken at first. Luckily, however, she escaped with no serious trouble, and under the doctor's care is able to be up, although she received several nasty bruises."

"Is she in the lower parlor, the room where the bright light is?"

"Yes, the housekeeper bundled her up well and she received Mr. Bradley, her affianced. He called around eight or a half after to inquire how she was."

"The body of the servant has been removed, I suppose?" Patsy continued.

"Oh, yes; quite a while ago. Thanks to Mr. Carter, the investigation was conducted with the utmost care. Contrary to his, Mr. Carter's, opinion, however, the police set it down as deliberate suicide; they say it could be nothing else."

"But what of the chalk warning on the floor of the closet?"

"They do not treat that seriously; think it a joke."

"And the finger marks at the throat?"

"I see you know the details. They did not attempt to explain, but very likely think that he had a quarrel, previously, with one of the other servants."

"You are safe in believing in Nick Carter's theories, Mr. Minton."

"I am receiving no others."

"Does any one stay on guard nights in this house?"

"How do you mean?"

"Since these remarkable transactions have you taken the precaution to set a guard in the belief that, possibly, still greater atrocities will be performed, as you were already warned?"

"The housekeeper always remains up in the lower part of the house until twelve."

"But after that?"

"We have never deemed it necessary to keep any one awake all night."

"I would like to undertake that responsibility tonight."

"Do exactly as you think best. I have told Mr. Carter that I will cross him in nothing. Has he said anything with regard to the missing bonds; has he secured any clue?"

"I have not heard, sir."

"I personally believe it is hopeless. The guilty have made a safe escape."

"I should not say that with Mr. Carter on the case."

"He is a wizard, I know, but something tells me that he is pitted against a hopeless barrier of mystery."

"We shall see, Mr. Minton."

"You are indeed hopeful."

"We must be."

"Go anywhere in the house that you will. If you want any of the keys, ask Mrs. Chester, she will give them to you."

"Thanks."

For the present, at least, however, Patsy was not thinking so much of the interior of the house. The black night without suggested to him innumerable chances for secret operation on the part of possible enemies of that household.

He resolved to reconnoiter.

At the parlor door, in the darkness, having descended the stairs with not so much as a foot-fall sound, he stopped and listened. He could hear voices within, pitched in a low key. A woman was crying, actually crying.

"Sounds interesting," Patsy ruminated.

"You must not cry, Grace," a man's voice said, "I regret deeply that I must take this step, but it is for your own good, my darling."

"I can't—I refuse to understand you," the girl chokingly retorted.

"But you must," he insisted, "it is best, I say."

"I could never bear to have you leave me, not now, not now, Charles," Grace sobbed, as if her heart were breaking, "what could I tell my father; what could I tell my friends? You are most inconsiderate. Why will you refuse to explain?"

"It would only grieve you the more."

Again she burst into uncontrollable tears.

"No, no, no," Patsy heard her cry, in a stifling voice.

"I still insist, my dear."

There was a long silence, broken only by the woman's bitter sobs, from which she apparently could find no relief, and Patsy, at the door, in the dark, felt like jumping in and administering a sound thrashing to any chap mean enough to bring an already sick girl to this point of mental anguish.

It smacked of the absolutely brutal.

"Good-by, dearest girl," Bradley said.

Patsy waited to hear no more. He felt that they would come out in a moment or so, the man at least, and he did not want to be caught in his present position. He softly opened the porch door, ran down the stairs and fell on his hands and knees on the grass, crawling to the shade of a low bush.

He was up and away from the outer path only by a low stone fence, half as high as himself, over which

he could spring if it was deemed necessary. He lay quite still in the darkness.

His surmises were correct.

Something remarkable was as sure to happen as that it was a pitchy-dark night, and that the very air seemed charged with mystery.

A twig or bit of gravel or something sounded across the stone wall, not two feet from where Patsy lay, as if some one had just stolen up to that point.

Then there were voices.

"He should be coming out before long," Patsy heard distinctly, though it had been whispered; then there were more than one.

"If I'm not very much mistaken," a second voice declared in answer.

"Do you think he has them?"

"It is worth the try."

"Wasn't it a lucky streak we caught that interloper, Carter?"

"You bet it was."

"If the Scotchman remains drunk the man will stay there a week, as helpless as a fly in a bottle."

"It serves him right."

"Did you know that MacGreggor was reusing drunk, and we met him on his way up to the avenue for more?"

"Yes; he was singing his ballads before he ever left the house. I could hear him from up where I was."

"Jupiter!" Patsy thought, "they have nabbed the chief as sure as guns. I'll bet they've cooped him in the minister's house that Chick told me about. That MacGreggor is the same Scotchman Chick talked with."

He heard a stir again beyond the rock fence. While the conversation could not possibly have been heard beyond a stretch of five feet, Patsy had made it out because of his close proximity.

Yet now he dare not make a move. The speakers were crouching in the gloom and evidently expecting some one—sone one upon whom they intended to pour forth their rascally spite.

"It's young Bradley as sure as sticks," Patsy thought.

As he made up his mind to this, the house door opened.

A little beam of light sprang across the porch and was swallowed in the blackness beyond, yet, for one fateful second, the detective saw the erect form of young Bradley silhouetted; saw him shake hands with some one and then turn with a brisk step to the street path, putting on his hat at the same time.

"There he is."

"Curse the brat, he's coming this way, too."

Patsy Garvan felt his nerves tingling; felt his blood suddenly chill in his veins. He changed position only enough to draw a revolver from his hip-pocket and pull upward swiftly in the gloom by the rose bush.

It was a deadly ambush, and Patsy knew it; rascal fighting rascal in a grotesque midnight battle; yet Patsy would not see Bradley murdered in cold blood; he must intervene at all costs.

Nearer and nearer sounded the young fellow's quick steps along the gravel path under the trees.

CHAPTER X.

CLIPPING A FEW SPRY WINGS.

Chick was not at all surprised by his fortunate discovery in Charley Bradley's room. A mask and a pair of revolvers were in direct keeping with the detective's summary of his man. Chick believed, as he had from the very beginning, that Bradley, working through Miss Minton's love for him, had been mixed up in the missing bond case. Here was undeniable proof to show that, at least, Bradley was not an average citizen. Honest citizens do not need masks, nor do they make it a constant practice to carry around guns of a character generally found on the East Side, where "an eye for an eye" is the mottó.

He left the three pieces of evidence, however, just where he had found them in the suit-case, pushing it carefully back beneath the bed. There was no pressing need to search the remainder of the room. It was absolutely empty, save for a few clothes hung in a closet, not until now visited. Bradley had made a quick change and gone out. There was little of value in the pockets, and the most minute covering of every square inch of the apartments brought nothing of value to the surface. Satisfied with his investigations thus far, Chick closed and locked the door and descended to the main office. Here he found a stupid sort of sandy-haired young fellow in charge of the place. From the café beyond came the sounds of thick tongues and riotous laughter. He had no hesitancy in addressing the clerk.

"Is Mr. Bradley in?" he asked.

"No such person stopping with us," was the drawled response after a monotonous study of the fat register.

"Well, you know who I mean, Room 26."

"Oh, Mr. Cartright; no, sir, he went out only a few minutes ago."

"Do you know where I can find him?" Chick insisted.

The clerk shook his head.

"I don't."

"How long has he been stopping here?"

"Two days."

"When can I find him in?"

"I couldn't say that. He is coming and going all the while."

"Any visitors?"

"Look here, what you trying to get at, eh?"

"I have business with him, important business."

"I don't know anything about his visitors."

"But he's been here for two days."

"Yes, sir."

"I thought he only came from Chicago a day or so ago?"

"Well, you're wrong; he called here five days ago and made arrangements about that room. I guess you're mistaken in your party."

"Perhaps I am."

Chick walked away, deeply buried in thought. Five days previously, young Bradley had seen about his room, and yet Nick Carter had been assured that the young fellow came by a swift train from Chicago, not much more than twenty-four hours ago. What was Bradley working? It looked like a mysterious double-deal as far as Chick could make out.

He was scheduled to meet Brevert and his son Tom at the bank downtown between eight and nine. That hour was steadily and surely approaching, but there was yet an opportunity to stop at the house. Chick took a taxi to Madison Avenue and ran impatiently up the stairs.

Both Joseph and Danny were present. They were playing checkers in one of the rooms, smugly comfortable and satisfied.

"Oh, Danny," he began.

"Yes, Mr. Carter."

"Is your machine is commission?"

"It is, sir."

"Then I think you'd better attend to a little matter."

"I'm ready and more than willing, Mr. Chick."

"You know where the Minton place is?"

"I rather think I ought to."

"I've just seen Bradley, the girl's affianced. Caught him under rather suspicious circumstances and I think we have bagged the real game. I can't keep up the trail because Nick wanted me to see about Tom Brevert, and I have an important date there. I wish you'd do something for me."

"What is it, sir?"

"Take a spin in the car. Go as quickly as you can up to the Minton house. See if Bradley calls there tonight. I can't catch Nick, and I'm not sure what he expects. He hasn't called up on the phone, has he?"

"No, but Patsy went around to the house."

"Just the same, I'm not willing to stand the chance of missing a trick. Watch Bradley. See when he enters and when he leaves. I think it's mighty important and I'm sure that Nick will agree with me."

"I'm off."

Joseph put the men back in the box without so much as a change of expression. Danny went to his car and Chick started for his downtown mission, hoping that all would turn out as per programme. That he was doomed to bitter disappointment may readily be understood.

* * * * * * *

To return to our mutual friend, Patsy Garvan, huddled behind the rose bush on the Minton lawn, is only fair to Patsy and his exciting part in the adventures of the night. The quick steps of young Bradley on the gravel walk had set the young fellow's nerves atingle and his entire body became tense as he thought of the certain death that confronted Grace's sweetheart, should anything go amiss.

That precious trio beneath the trees were as silent as the night and the drive.

For one terribly anxious moment Patsy Garvan wondered what was best to do under the circumstances. He could catch the labored breathing of three men not two feet from him beyond the stone wall, and all the while Bradley was approaching his doom.

Plucky Patsy was working against time and conditions. He thrust his right arm across the stone wall in the direction of the ambushed scoundrels and blazed away, three times in quick succession with his revolver. He fired more to alarm and frighten than to kill, yet the effect of those chance shots was something entirely unlooked for.

By the sudden glare he could see scurrying, frightened figures, three of them.

At least two shots had taken effect.

Although he did not know it then, big, muscular and extremely tall Ford lurched forward with a wound that sent him headforemost to the gravel path.

The second shot went wild, but the third winged another member of the rascally trio—the mysterious bald-headed individual. His right arm reached over for his left as a ball entered the fleshy part of that member directly above the wrist.

In the gloom the third man managed to escape.

Bradley could be heard running back to the house, stumbling and giving voice to his astonishment.

Patsy took advantage of his unexpected gain.

He leaped over the waist-high wall, directly upon the bald-headed man who, while suffering from his wound, was by no means in the toils.

Patsy closed in upon him, while only a few inches away Ford lay twisting and spitting blood, in real agony.

A shrill whistle came from the road beyond.

Patsy could see nothing, for it was dark, the air hot and sultry, and the only lights those across the river or far down the drive.

"Danny, Danny, help," he called.

He knew that whistle above all others.

Again the signal whistle.

Patsy could hear the steady, mechanical hum of an automobile, and silently thanked his stars that Danny chanced on the scene. The shots would arouse the neighborhood and there was apt to be a pretty rumpus before it was all over. He wanted to lay hands on at least two of the ambush crowd, however, and that accounted for his spring across the stone hedge.

Danny was just as alert.

The machine was buzzing and thumping out a warning in the darkness somewhere when the chauffeur reached the gravel path well prepared to give

Patsy all the desired assistance. As a scrapper, Danny had won more than one medal. He was like iron, and did not know the meaning of fear.

Patsy's midnight assailant was suddenly thumped over the head from behind.

That was the first thing Danny accomplished and it struck his man senseless in a jiffy.

"Any more?" he chirped.

"On the ground," Patsy panted.

"Did you wing him?"

"I guess I did, but he's working yet."

"This is *too* easy."

Ford was bleeding seriously, and as they placed him in the back of the car his groans were pathetic to hear. No fight had been left in that big hulk of a human being. With the bald-headed man it was even easier. Danny's blow had put him completely out of business.

They lifted his inanimate body and deposited it alongside Ford.

From the darkness, at this juncture, Bradley appeared, white of face and trembling violently.

"The scoundrels tried to kill me in ambush, didn't they?" he inquired. He stood where the lights from the machine could suddenly illuminate him, as Danny turned them on, for the car had approached in total darkness.

"I guess they certainly did," Patsy responded.

"Do you know who they are?"

This in a peculiar tone, half question and half challenge as Nick Carter's two assistants made it out.

"We certainly do," repeated Patsy, with emphasis.

"Can I help you?"

"I guess you'll have to," Patsy answered as he turned to Danny, now watching the two wounded men in the back part of the car; "I'll have to be gone a few minutes, Danny; no way out of it. They have Nick dead to rights at the house. Let Mr. Bradley lend you a hand, but keep the car here until I get back. No telling, we may need you. Those shots will bring a cop or two, and you'll have no trouble."

Patsy was more disturbed over what might have happened to his chief than the capture of the two rogues. From what conversation he had overheard, he felt certain that he would find Nick a prisoner, somewhere in the big house next to the Minton mansion. It was but a step, and he was determined to go.

He found the yard absolutely shrouded in darkness and the entire place void of lights.

Patsy had no way of knowing how to enter the house, and the doors were boarded up, together with many of the windows. By sheer chance, he wandered back to the rear, and MacGreggor, in a drunken stupor, had left the door open that led to the servants' quarters.

Patsy was not long in making an entrance.

He did not have a flash, and matches had to be brought into play, so he lighted one after another until he could get his bearings. The first room he entered was evidently the Scotchman's living room. It was off from a capacious kitchen, but the mode of life MacGreggor followed was very clearly shown. On the plain wooden table there were two or three empty gin bottles, and the small cot with its filthy coverings was in a state of disrepute. On every side there were indications that MacGreggor spent most of his time drinking, not only while at the house but when away from it. A candle, half consumed, stood on the table beside a torn book, and Patsy took this into his joyful possession, lighting it, his matches being well-nigh consumed.

Now a systematic search of every floor began. The daring lad found dust over everything and all furniture covered with canvas. The interior fittings were handsome, but neglected. It was not until he gained the second floor and had traversed half of the space that he heard an ominous, fearful sound—a sound that chilled him from head to foot; a crackling, hissing, sputtering, too comprehensive to be mistaken, and with it, as if projected from the gloom in an instant, the red glare of a tongue of flame.

A door stood open down the hall, and it was through this door that Patsy saw the flame from which the sounds were emitted.

"Fire!" he exclaimed in a breath.

With only his chief in mind the lad burst ahead, the smoke almost stifling him at every step. He reached the open door and lurched through it, surrounded by licking sheets of fire.

Bound to a great brass cross and completely surrounded by the fire, Patsy saw a well-known figure, the figure of Nick Carter, head drooped on breast, figure inert, the smoke billowing in ugly black masses above him and on every side.

CHAPTER XI.

TRYING TO PLACE THE GUILT.

Patsy Garvan was not afraid of a little thing like a burning room, where the life of his beloved chief was concerned. He drew a deep breath, snatched out his knife and ran to the cross, severing the innumerable cords that held Nick Carter a prisoner. Nick half fell outward and downward into his arms, for the smoke and heat had all but conquered him. Patsy was prepared for it. He caught the detective, staggered with him to the outer hall, stumbling as he did so over a second figure prone upon the floor.

It was MacGreggor, the Scotchman, and he was in a drunken stupor.

Having dragged Nick to safety, Patsy caught the Scotchman by the heels and pulled him from the room. Only the draperies and rugs and light furniture coverings were on fire. Working like a beaver, Patsy began to stamp these out, using the rugs from the front hall to assist him. At the expiration of five minutes he had gotten the best of the flames, and

only a few glittering sparks, here and there, gave suggestion of what had been a seething hot-bed of fire so shortly before.

MacGreggor remained inanimate. Liquor had made him unconscious, and he was apt to remain in that condition for hours. Nick Carter, on the other hand, soon revived, once a window was raised and the fresh air swept in his face.

"It's me, Patsy, Mr. Carter."

"Guess you landed just in time, Patsy."

"How are you feeling?"

"All right; somewhat dazed, with a slight headache, and my arms hurt, but you needn't worry about me."

"Did the Scotchman set that room afire?"

"He did, but it was an accident."

"Looked like a piece of dirty work to me."

"No, I'm positive it wasn't. MacGreggor must have stumbled back to the house after a round of drinks on the avenue. He came in by the side entrance and was not noticed."

"I found his door open below. That was how I got in."

"Yes, I imagined so. In the meanwhile I had worked the gag half off and was able to raise a rumpus. He heard me, and, lighting a lamp, came up through the house, trying to find out what it all meant. MacGreggor, you know, is not mixed up with the others, Patsy. He is just a stupid, drunken fellow, and he has been away so much of the time that it has been easy to impose upon him. He reached this door, unlocked it and came in. He held the lamp out in front of him, but I suppose the liquor rushed to his head at the vital second. At any rate, the next thing I knew he had lunged forward, the lamp flying from his hands, and his head struck the metal base of the cross. It was all over then. Enough oil leaked from the lamp to catch the rugs, and if you had not arrived just as you did, Chick would be the new chief, I can tell you. I thought it was all over, and the smoke got the best of me."

"I guess I put out all the flames."

"And a mighty neat job you made of it. How did you learn I was here?"

"You told me to watch at the house."

"Yes, but——"

"Three of the plotters came along the yard at the Minton house. I happened to be flat on my stomach on the lawn and heard them mention that they had fixed you. I knew it must be here."

"But they were after Bradley, I grant."

"They certainly were, but we cooked that."

"Did you get them, honestly?"

"Danny helped me. We clipped the wings of two—that bald-headed chap and the big one."

"Oh, Ford, but what of Tom Brevert?"

"Got away."

"I'm sorry of that; he is the one we most wanted."

"Looks to me, Mr. Carter, as if this case was about as unsettled as when we took it. I'm confessedly mixed up."

"On the contrary, Patsy, it is practically settled."

"Do you mean that, sir?"

"I certainly do."

"Shall I take another look in to see if the fire is all out?"

"I'll go with you. I'm hoping that a bit of crumpled paper I dropped, when they bound me to the brass cross and which fell back of it, has not been destroyed."

"Let me hunt for you."

"We'll both look."

Much to the detective's satisfaction that long deferred message on the yellow sheet was finally made known. Jostled as it had been by fate, it was forever clear, or, at least, as clear as present circumstances would allow.

The scribbled, typewritten sheet read:

"Eph: I want to fix up that horse. If you try any back work with us, it will queer you forever. If you do as we say it will mean a cool two hundred—and you need it. Better think it over."

There was absolutely no signature.

"What do you make of that?" Patsy blinked, for up to this time he was not thoroughly conversant with all of the kinks of the case.

"Just what I suspected," Nick Carter smiled.

"That doesn't tell me anything, sir."

"Patsy, Tom Brevert wrote that letter and he rattled it off on one of the typewriters in his father's banking establishment. I will make my word good to-morrow by examining every machine in the place. See the bad alignment: it was evident on the envelope address I first found in the old coat hanging in the closet."

"But what was Tom wanting?"

"Jealousy, Patsy, rank jealousy, and hatred of Minton combined. He knew that young Bradley, the girl's accepted suitor, and Tom's bitterest rival, and Grace Minton were to go out horseback riding that morning. It occurred to Tom to rig up the saddle of Bradley's horse to throw him, cause a runaway, and

if the young Chicago man was killed nothing could be better. He wanted Ephus to do it, but the old servant refused."

"How can you figure that, Nick?"

"Because, Patsy, because Tom Brevert murdered old Ephus."

"What! Tom did it?"

"He did."

"You made quick work of the affair, Nick."

"I felt the solution from the moment Mr. Hinton gave me three or four bits of chance information. Old Eph did not tell his master immediately, for he knew that Tom, at one time, had been a constant visitor at the Minton house, courting Grace. He was thinking it over carefully in his methodical, thick way. The letter he crumpled up, upon reading it in the stable. He dropped it, however, in the straw of one of the stalls by mistake, and the empty envelope was thrust hurriedly into his jacket. He wore the blue one with the brass buttons the day he went down there."

"Somebody must have fixed up the saddle."

"Somebody did, most assuredly. Ford did that. Ford is an all-around rascal, but Ford is a clumsy fool, at best. He didn't get his instructions clearly, for he bungled. The steel point was put under the wrong saddle, and Miss Grace Minton rode that horse. She it was who chanced to be Tom Brevert's innocent victim."

"What a young fiend he is, eh?"

"The only person who can see any good in him is his patient father, which is quite natural, Patsy," Nick Carter observed. "Tom has been going from bad to worse for the past year; I have learned that by looking around some. He is head over heels in debt and hard put. It's a wonder to me that he has not extended his little operations to theft; in fact, I presume he has, for we find him in very bad company."

"How can you clinch this saddle business?"

"First, I'll overhaul the typewriters in the banking house."

"And the murder of old Ephus——"

"Having looked carefully over the ground, and having read the letter directed to Ephus, there is only one thing to think. At one time Tom could come and go as he pleased at the big house. His moves were never questioned and he knew every door and window and closet. Ephus, I believe, refused to do as Tom had asked. There was a stormy interview in the stables, and Ephus hurried to the house. That was during the late afternoon. It may have been that Ephus, in a rage, declared his intention to tell the whole matter to his master, in which event Tom would have been in a very bad pickle. He followed Ephus, gaining the house under cover of darkness without being noticed. He may have made one last plea to Ephus. It did not avail. The servant went to the closet for his coat and Tom followed."

"It works out almost mathematically, Mr. Carter. If you can only chase down that typewriter clue I guess it will end in a conviction. We have the kid on one count; he was in the party intent on killing young Bradley."

"We have yet to account for the chalk writing on the floor of the closet, made after the body of Ephus was suspended from the hook by a rope—that covert warning in white."

"I guess you've worked the case as fast as it could be worked already, Nick; why worry over that? What shall we do with this bonny, bonny Scotchman, MacGreggor?"

"Take him downstairs and leave him in his own bunk to sleep off the liquor. The fire may, after all, have been indirectly responsible for my escape—it lighted the way for you."

"I'm inclined to think, Nick, that this last episode will be a lesson to the Scotchman. He knows that every one is wise to his behavior, and I guess he wouldn't want to lose his job."

"Simply a big, lazy, intemperate fellow with no malice in his heart; that was my personal opinion. He was away soused so much of the time that a standing army could have moved into this house and he would not have been the wiser.

"What an admirable location for secret operations, eh?" the detective continued. "From that little circular window a vista of the house and grounds could be had at all times. From it, the lawn and the little rear garden are perfectly clear. The rascals saw Minton bring the bonds out, and if they had been supplied with a glass they could almost read the writing on them. The distance, you see, is not great between the houses."

"Didn't Chick say something about a hole cut in the hedge; they must have done that during the night, previous to the robbery of the bonds."

"I trust the bald-headed man can enlighten us on that score."

Having deposited the still stupefied MacGreggor in his kitchen bunk and turned out all lights, Nick Carter and Patsy circled the house and gained the drive, where they knew Danny and the machine were still waiting.

Patsy gave his low, peculiar whistle.

It was immediately answered from the darkness ahead, but the electric lights had been extinguished again for some reason, and it was next to impossible to see anything at all.

"Everything O. K., Danny?" Nick called.

"Oh, is that you, Mr. Carter?"

"It certainly is, Danny."

"And Patsy is with you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I've got a hard luck story to tell you. I had a game worked on me that makes me feel like a plugged coin. Slick, it was the slickest thing I ever saw."

"Your game get away?"

"One of 'em."

"Which one?"

"That bald-headed guy."

"The devil," Patsy Garvan swore softly in the gloom.

"But the other fellow is in the car?"

"Ford, yes; I fixed him."

"Where did Bradley go?"

"That's where the trick comes in, Mr. Carter," Danny went on to explain, a tone of embarrassment in his voice. "As Patsy will tell you, he came running up and thanked us for interfering in his behalf. I guess Patsy saved his life. There can't be any doubt of that. Well, I told Bradley to stay with the two on the back seat while I held down the front, ready to start if any other rogues shoved on the scene."

"Sensible enough, Danny," the detective put in.

"I knew Ford was in bad shape, with that cut on his head, and wouldn't try any get-away for quite some time. With the other fellow it was different. I looked back once and Bradley had his revolver drawn. He was telling the bald-headed fellow to hold it tight or he'd shoot. Five minutes later I looked again, and, by Heaven, sir, both of them, *both* had skipped, with never so much as a sound that I could hear. Bradley let him go, I'm sure of it."

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

Nick Carter pulled out his watch and squinted at its face while Patsy held a match. It was twenty-one minutes of two. He ordered the machine run on to the house and, as he expected, found an excited little group in one of the lower parlors. The shots had been heard and every one, including the servants, was frightened.

Nick Carter had a two-fold hurried mission to perform. He wanted to reassure Minton, already under a high nervous strain, and have a talk with Miss Grace. Patsy had repeated the conversation heard through the parlor door, and it only clinched a theory that had been paramount with the detective since the first day of the case.

"We have captured one of our men," Nick explained to the master of the house, in private, "we have, in short, the very shaggy-headed man who actually snatched the bonds from the table. He is out in the machine. A second prisoner made his escape. Now I should like to ask you a few important questions, Mr. Minton. Have you had a talk with Mr. Bradley this evening?"

"On his arrival this evening, to see how Grace was progressing, he sent word up to my office that he would like to have a word with me if it was convenient."

"But you did not see him?"

"No, I was suffering from a terrible attack of neuralgia, and it was impossible. I sent word to that effect."

"What did Mr. Bradley answer?"

"He made an appointment—I am to meet him tomorrow."

"Where?"

"At his hotel."

"Did he mention his business?"

"No."

"Can you think of any business he could transact with you?"

"I confess I cannot."

"That is all for to-night, Mr. Minton. I would like a few words with your daughter."

"It strikes me, Carter, that your operations are growing more mysterious every hour."

"On the contrary, the sky is clearing. There is no longer a mystery."

"Do you mean that?"

"I do."

"And the bonds——"

"You will have them, if I am not very much mistaken, during the next twenty-four hours."

Nick Carter was permitted to enter the parlor where Grace was still huddled up on a sofa, surrounded by pillows and coverlets. The housekeeper was present, an elderly lady, and he dismissed her for the time being.

"Miss Minton," the detective began, "this is an embarrassing question to ask, but it must be answered. I am thinking only of your father; therefore, you must oblige me."

The girl's eyes were very red from weeping, a point that had not escaped Nick Carter. She was nervous and very much unstrung.

"Nothing can matter very much now, Mr. Carter," she said wearily, "I am so unhappy, so miserable."

"Mr. Bradley, your affianced, called this evening, did he not?"

"Yes."

"He came to tell you, with no apparent reason, that he could not marry you."

She looked up in surprise.

"How did you know," she asked, "I have told this to no one."

"We *must* know, Miss Minton. I see you are inclined to be frank with me. You were unable to force Mr. Bradley to give a reason for this sudden decision?"

"He absolutely refused."

"You forced the question?"

"I begged, I implored."

"Let me say, at this juncture, Miss Minton, that you need not longer worry. I shall be prepared, in the morning, to myself give you Mr. Bradley's reason for this action. It was prompted only by the best of intentions. It was the act of an honorable man and you will respect him when you know the details."

She began to cry again, but a new light had flooded into the tired eyes and she thanked the detective with joyous appreciation.

"But will you not tell me now, Mr. Carter?"

He shook his head.

"To-morrow, Miss Minton."

The car, having stood in such excellent service night and day, now sped with Nick and his associates back to Madison Avenue. It was very late, and the detective insisted that all hands should turn in. Ford was carried to Nick's house and his hurt treated by the detective himself, who had a general idea of the rudiments of medicine and surgery, and could attend the big fellow's scalp wound without difficulty.

That Nick had a definite idea in mind in this deviation from his customary methods, will be made perfectly apparent later.

Promptly at eight, Carter stepped in his car, with Danny up front. Patsy, it was decided, should remain at the house on call, as nothing had been heard from Chick at all.

The detective found the drowsy little establishment just getting into step. The streets in the immediate vicinity were traffic-ridden at this important hour, however, and all was bustle and activity in that quarter.

The car waited immediately in front of the building, and Nick Carter entered.

"Is Mr. Brevert in?" he asked.

"No, sir," the clerk responded, "he is not down yet."

"Here is my card," Nick added, with assurance, "I want to look over your typewriters. The boss' car was doing nothing this morning, and it was so far down, the chauffeur said he would give me the spin. I'm from the Remington people, you know."

Nick carried a little black satchel in one hand.

With no interference whatever, he was shown into the office and behind the railings. Several of the clerks mentioned, as he passed, that their machines needed this or that. One by one, Nick Carter tried them over, watching the alignment and the worn edge of the letter I.

"There is a machine in Mr. Brevert's private office, yonder, sir," the same sandy-haired clerk declared, "that is in awful bum repair. Type don't line up; better get at that one before the boss arrives. He's fussy that way about tinkering and noises."

"Good, I will," Nick Carter smilingly assented.

But it was not the typewriter that attracted his attention the moment he entered. It was a safe, a small safe standing amid the riot of tall desks, papers, baskets, ledgers and dust. The light did not fall heavily upon it, but Nick's practiced eyes had noted something unusual, grotesque, astonishing.

"I'll attend to the machine," the detective remarked, as he raised the lid of the movable desk. "Oh, by the way, Mr. Tom Brevert isn't around, is he?"

"Haven't seen him, no."

"He has a desk in here, hasn't he?"

"Who, Tom?" and the clerk laughed, looking back over his shoulder. "No, Tom hasn't any desk. What would he need one for? He's too nervous to fuss with a chair and a desk."

"Guess he's been at this machine if he's nervous, then," Carter suggested, "it is in bad condition."

"Yes, I've seen Tom write on that old icewagon," the clerk admitted, "not longer than a couple of days ago."

But Nick Carter asked no more questions.

As he tinkered at the typewriter, he was running over in his mind the written summary of Chick's con-

versation with old Mr. Brevert, just as Chick had fired it in to Joseph.

"Tom is more clever than I took him to be; this is a real comedy," he muttered, and just then the door opened and Mr. Brevert himself entered, ripping mad, followed by several smiling, leering clerks, including the fellow who had been of material assistance to Nick from the start.

"Who told you to come down and fix these machines?" Brevert thundered.

"We got a wire at the office."

"What office?"

"Remington agency."

"Who sent it?"

"How should I know? Anything wrong, Mr. Brevert."

"Yes, there *is* something wrong, young man," the old man bawled, "it's a trick to get a little extra out of me. Why, confound it, man, I made arrangements only last Thursday to have all new machines put in at the end of this week and these go out in part exchange."

Nick Carter expressed the greatest surprise.

"I'm very, very sorry, sir."

"Well, you can get out."

The moment of counter-play was at hand. In some respects, Nick Carter disliked the work. It was one of those heart-breaking duties that went against the grain, andstill it was inevitable.

"Mr. Brevert," he began, lowering his voice, "you have been robbed and do not know it.'

"I *know* I have been robbed," the other exclaimed, "what of it; you're not a detective, are you?"

"That happens to be my profession."

"Well, I didn't employ you, so you can just——"

"Wait, wait, your temper is getting the best of you. That safe in the corner—the dark corner. It was only recently moved in here, was it not?"

The dollar-merchant stepped forward, intuitively.

"It was moved in last night some time; what do you mean?"

"I mean that it is a grand hoax. You have been swindled by third-rate magic; by deft manipulations of stage accessories. That is what I mean. Did the old safe contain anything of great value?"

"Fifty thousand dollars in actual cash."

"You mean they were in the old safe which was supposed to go to your home?"

"Yes, that is what I mean."

"You have not taken that cash from the old safe, have you?"

"No, it is safely stored in my private locked room at the house."

"And it was your intention to transfer all of these valuables to the new safe there, perhaps to-day, or at your convenience?"

"That was my intention, yes, sir."

"Too late, I'm sorry, sir!"

The dollar-merchant fell back in amazement as the detective deliberately pulled the safe apart. "Tricked!" was Carter's smiling exclamation.

Nick went on to briefly outline his version of the remarkable theft. In the first place, Tom Brevert, associating with poor company and gambling beyond his depth, had found it necessary to get money and get it quickly. He had been pressed on all sides. In the midst of this, the breaking off of all relations with his old sweetheart, Grace Minton, had made him desperate, for he was madly infatuated with her. It turned him into a dare-devil, caring little or nothing for the conventionalities of his daily social life, and the bigger world about him. First it was small, petty thefts around the bank; then a greater opportunity was presented when his father turned over to him the exchange of the safes.

Much crooked detail had been gleaned from the man Ford, whom he had picked up in a tough hangout, and Tom, after his escape from the ambush party at a few minutes of twelve, chased for his father's little establishment in a then dead section of town. He had a wagon in readiness; authentic helpers carried the small safe from the bank and it was carted to the house. But Tom was jester enough to appreciate a good joke. He had seen, in the papier-mache store, everything from stage safes to false faces, and imitation trunks. He knew the night watchman, a man of his own calibre, and stating that he wanted to play a good one on the boys at the office, shifted the paper safe, painted up to respectability, back into the place of the old one, shutting the blinds that as little light as possible strike it. This done, having keys of his own, he left the place and everything had been accomplished under the cloak of the legitimate, past patrolman and night guards, for Tom Brevert had been assigned to that very task in connection with moving the safe.

It can well be imagined that Tom opened the old safe at the house, as it had been left on the first floor, when every one else was asleep. The valuables were soon in his possession, and he did not intend to return, a fact that goes without saying.

Nick Carter did not delve into the matter of the murder of old Eplus. Brevert was suffering as it

was, and he wept in his wrinkled old hands, once the clerks had withdrawn and the two were left alone.

"I knew he was bad, Carter," the old man sobbed, "but I loved him—loved him for his mother's sake and because he was my son. If he had only asked me, I would have given it all to him."

* * * * * * *

At ten o'clock, Nick Carter, seated at his desk in his private office, heard the phone bell tinkle furiously.

"See who it is, please," he said to Joseph, for the detective had been kept quite busy arranging the pages of Ford's signed confession, and making last preparations to call at the Riverside home of the Mintons.

Joseph held the receiver.

"It is Mr. Chickering, sir," he said.

"I'll take the wire."

Chick's voice suggested great excitement.

"Is that you, Nick?"

"Yes."

"I've got him—I've got him," Chick almost shouted over the wire.

"Who?"

"The man who took the bonds."

"What is his name, Chick?"

"Charlie Bradley, of course."

Nick Carter jumped to his feet, his face turning pale and his eyes burning with sudden displeasure and excitement.

"You've made a horrible mistake, Chick."

"Oh, no, I haven't."

"But I say you have. Where are you now?"

"In the man's little den of a room up on Fifty-ninth Street."

"Is Bradley there?"

"Yes, I have him in handcuffs."

"How long ago did this happen?"

"I nabbed him not more than twenty minutes ago. Been waiting part of the night and several hours this morning. Finally he came in, all flurried and looking as if he had made a night of it."

"Well, proceed."

"I had been around to meet old Brevert and Tom at the bank between eight and nine. Everything was clear up to nine-thirty and I left. I said to myself that it would be a good idea to drop around to Bradley's quarters again and look for new developments. I did. I hid in a closet and waited for him. The first thing he did was to take those stolen bonds from an inside pocket."

"Have you wired the police?"

"No."

"Raised a fuss in the hotel?"

"No."

"All right, put Bradley on the wire, I want to talk with him."

"But, Nick, I—I——"

"Please do as I say, Chick."

There was a brief interval.

"Hello, Bradley."

"Hello, Mr. Carter, I believe?"

"Yes. Bradley, you've been a good son but it nearly got you into trouble. I have a piece of advice for you. Keep out of that bond business. Turn them over to Chick and I will see that Mr. Minton receives them safely enough. That will clear your skirts; he need never know, nor the girl."

"Can you do this, Carter? let me explain, let me tell you——"

"Everything is already known to me, Bradley. Your father is a bad egg. That is not your fault. When you knew that he had swung on to New York from Chicago, you followed him, fearful lest he complicate your relationship with Miss Grace. Am I correct in this assumption?"

"You are, sir, perfectly."

"To continue, briefly. You did not let the Minton family or even Grace Minton know that you were in town so early. You met your father and discovered that he was mixed up in a deal to defraud and rob the very man whose daughter you loved. All these pleadings amounted to nothing, although you hoped in vain. The first fatal discovery was due to a little accidental snap shot showing the top part of your father's head only. He had looked over the hedge at the same moment Ford was escaping and the kodak did its business. Your faces were identical, although, to give me full credit, I did not make a scene then and there. The squint was unmistakable. At about this time, Tom Brevert became connected with your father and Ford. They made the empty house next to Minton's their hide-and-seek headquarters. Tom naturally knew that the bonds, together with other Minton money, were being steadily withdrawn from the bank. He kept track of these withdrawals and the time. In turn, your father was placed in possession of the information. The night before the theft of the bonds, Ford cut his way into the yard by the hedge. It was the intention at that time to burglarize the house, but fortune favored the two, for your father saw, by

means of glasses, the bonds on the table in the little back yard. Then quick action was taken."

"You speak word for word, as I know it to be, sir."

"We now need one connecting link only. You have been doing some detective work of your own. You have watched Tom Brevert's actions down on the side streets at the bank, for one of my assistants saw you there; and with a firm determination to rescue the bonds, for the sake of your affianced and the honor of your own good family name, you called at the minister's house, actually gaining possession of the bonds by cleverness."

"It was a duty, nothing else."

"Your father, then, thought that you would be willing to come over to his side. When you started out on these expeditions you always carried revolvers and sometimes used a black mask. These articles were found in your room, but we do not hold them up against you. When with crooks, you were compelled to act the part. On the night you called upon Grace, after the accident, you intended to deliver the bonds secretly to her father. He was sick and could not see you. An engagement was made for to-day. Pass it off. We shall arrange all that for you. Personally I consider it foolhardy to have walked deliberately out into the night when you knew that your father, Ford and Tom Brevert might be laying for you—which they were. Had Patsy not been on the ground, you would have been killed. What they wanted was to recover the bonds, of course, and your own father was willing to take your life for them."

"Such is the mystery of life, Mr. Carter."

"Can you tell us where we can find him?"

"Please, please do not ask me to. I did permit him to escape from the automobile. That was my privilege, let us say. I had the bonds—the score was even."

"But not the one with society."

"Still, my lips are sealed."

"Be it so, Bradley. Perhaps I do not blame you. If Ford's written confession can be hushed to the same extent, I will arrange it for your sake—and—for the sake of pretty, brave little Grace Minton."

"Thank you, Mr. Carter."

"Please put my assistant back on the wire."

Chick answered immediately.

"Chick, it's all right. I'll explain later. Bring the bonds around to the house here as soon as you can."

"But—but——"

"No buts about it, Chick. You have made a very natural mistake, that's all. Poor Bradley was playing against desperate odds, and it's my private opinion that he won out neatly. As for Tom Brevert, he's slick enough to skip with his pile. That is our next case—landing that fish; he's too dangerous to have at large, and the murder of Old Ephus was a terrible, a degenerate crime. I mean to run Tom to earth. When a young scamp gets so hardened that, out of sheer malice and revenge, he will return to the scene of the crime and write out a threat, I want that chap behind bars for personal reasons. It was the only thing that baffled me in the case—it baffled me until I saw some of Tom's handwriting, and then I knew it was his dastardly work. We will get him yet, Chick."

And they did.

Nick Carter's last duty in the affair of the missing bonds was a very agreeable one. Armed with the bonds, he took the machine to the Riverside Drive mansion and sprang out, happier than he had been in some time. What transpired in that conversation between him and Minton the reader need not know, there was no reference made to just where and how Nick Carter discovered the missing bonds, but young Charlie Bradley's name was not mentioned in any way.

"You promised you'd tell me something to-day," Grace called from the sunny parlor, where she lay on the sofa.

"Oh, so I did," the detective smilingly responded, "I wanted to tell you that Mr. Bradley will be around this afternoon, and if you're well enough, he wants to take you out for a drive. The matter that was troubling him has been entirely cleared. It was financial, let us say, and what he did was in the spirit of a noble sacrifice. He loves you devotedly."

"You make me very, very happy, Mr. Carter," she whispered, her cheeks growing crimson, "so very happy."

Nick was not very sentimental, but there was a suspicious dampness in his eyes as he climbed back into the big red touring car and turned, with a sad, half smile to the chauffeur:

"Danny," he said, "home for one hour and then I'm temporarily out of harness. I'll have a day's vacation or know the reason why."

THE END.

For a continuation of Nick Carter's unusual adventures, his long, patient search for that prince of young criminals, Tom Brevert, and the lapse from grace of a certain bald-headed rogue, read number 652 of the New Nick Carter Library, entitled "The Green Box Clue; or, Nick Carter's Good Friend."

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HOW FOREIGN POLICE DOGS WORK.

It seems rather curious, in view of the fact that France, Germany, America, and Belgium have proved the value of dogs as police assistants, that the authorities in England do not take very kindly to the idea of employing bloodhounds to help in the work of tracking criminals. And yet there are times when a good dog would prove of inestimable service to the police.

A burglary is committed at a country house, for instance, and in many cases the police are not informed until an hour or two after. In the meantime the criminal has got a good start and will probably get clear away ere the police have found clues which will place them upon his track. It would only be a matter of minutes, however, before a bloodhound got upon the scent, and if he did not actually find the criminal he would quickly provide the police with clues which would lead to his capture.

One of the objections to the use of dogs in such cases often advanced is that the criminal in this country always makes for the nearest railway station, thus rendering the animal practically useless. But it is not always safe to jump to this conclusion. On one occasion a burglary was committed, and the police supposed that the thief had gone off by the first morning train, especially as a strange man had been seen at the station. It was found afterward that he had done nothing of the sort, but had struck inland on foot. A dog brought to the scene would have given the right direction and saved much waste of time and expense.

One reason, perhaps, why the English police authorities do not follow the example of the Continental countries mentioned is that the criminal abroad is of a different type from what they have in Britain. The foreign thief usually carries firearms or a knife, and does not hesitate to attack the policeman who tries to capture him.

It is for this reason that the dogs used by the police of Brussels, for instance, are some of the most savage to be found. They are muzzled when on duty with the police at night, and the muzzles are only slipped when in pursuit of a criminal. And woe betide the latter when he is caught. The Brussels dogs, however, which are of the black sheep-dog breed, are not very good trackers, neither are those of Ghent, where the police have a splendid show of dogs, all of savage disposition, and invaluable for seizing a man running away.

The Brunswick police dogs, too, are very clever at this kind of work, and are better trackers than those of Brussels or Ghent. The following incidents furnish striking illustrations of how the Brunswick dogs assist justice:

A girl had been murdered in a farmhouse. A police dog was taken to the girl's room, where the crime took place. After it had scented about the blood-stained floor the farm hands were paraded. The dog rushed at one of them, growling savagely. The man was arrested, and on being examined his clothes were found to be stained with a spot of blood. He then confessed.

Another case Major Richardson found to be true was the innocence of a man being proved by a dog. A girl had been found drowned, and, as certain circumstances appeared suspicious, a man was arrested. The dog, on being taken to the girl's room, took up her trail and showed where she had walked down to the river. Her footsteps were single all the way, and this was taken as conclusive that it was a case of suicide, not murder; and afterward a letter was found written by the girl announcing her intention to commit suicide.

In Berlin the police dogs are not kept in an establishment together, but are boarded out separately with policemen, who receive sixty marks per annum for the keep of each dog. These dogs are sent to all parts of Germany to assist in criminal investigation. A wire to headquarters, and the dog starts in charge of a policeman without delay. In many cases the authorities do not wait for a wire, but, on hearing of a crime, dispatch the dog to the scene.

SHOCKING THE BANK OF ENGLAND.

The Bank of England has more than once passed through startling experiences. Of these perhaps the most unexpected was that connected with a communication it once received from an unknown source, a communication as vivid as any in the most flaming melodramatic novel.

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"No doubt you think you are all safe, and that your bank is safe; but I know better. I have been inside your bank during the last two nights, and you knew nothing about it. As I am not a thief, and wish to warn you of your danger, I invite you to meet me in the great square room at twelve to-night. I shall then explain all to you. Let only two of you come, and say nothing to any one else."

The next night the square room—"the richest compartment in the world," it has been called—was guarded, but nothing happened.

Then came the next phase of the mystery. A heavy chest of securities, taken from the strong room, arrived at the bank, with a letter complaining that the directors had notified the police, and that the writer had therefore not appeared, according to his promise. Now, he continued, to prove that he was not a thief he sent with his letter a chest of papers that he had taken from the bank. If a few men would assemble, without the police, in the strong room, the writer would join them at midnight. Otherwise the mystery would continue unsolved.

After solemn deliberation the directors decided to do as they were told. They assembled in the strong room. At midnight there came a cry from behind the stone walls, "Put out the lights!" They obeyed, then a man with a dark lantern entered. His story was soon told. He gained his living by searching the sewers at night, and through a sewer opening he had found his way into the richest room in the world.

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